Seven-day nurses strike ends at Kaiser Permanente in Los Angeles

Marc Wells
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On Monday, March 21 1,200 registered nurses (RNs) returned to work at Kaiser Permanente's Los Angeles Medical Center (LAMC), ending a strike, which was limited to seven days by National Nurses United (NNU), a coalition of three unions including the California Nurses Association (CNA).

Nurses have not had a contract for six years and have seen their wages frozen since 2011. They are also owed back pay and are opposed to understaffing, inadequate equipment and unsafe and dangerous conditions.

While it was widely reported that negotiations have been ongoing since September, shortly after the Federal Labor Board certified the CNA as the official LAMC union, neither Kaiser Permanente nor the CNA/NNU have revealed any of the details. A sellout deal is being prepared behind closed doors while publicly the two parties are posturing as antagonists.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported union officials calling for "a restructured benefits package and higher wages," which will translate in token wage adjustments in exchange for cuts of whatever benefits are left.

The justified anger and frustration of striking nurses were met with a platoon of security agents guarding the hospital's entrance. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of the RNs who sounded a more militant tone compared to the last strike a year ago.

Charles, an RN in the cardiac unit, described Kaiser as "too big an enterprise that takes all the money and pockets it. They save money through not staffing correctly; we work as a skeleton crew. It's very hard to take care of patients when you have no staff.

"This is the flagship hospital, yet we're the lowest paid nurses in Kaiser while they do all their expensive procedures here. I've been here six years, with no contract all this time. I thought coming to a big enterprise like Kaiser I'd be safe. But things have not been good. It's a highly stressful environment, worsened by a micromanaging model brought in by Obamacare.

"We're the lowest paid nurses and work in their flagship hospital. One concern in the deal is that back pay may be used as a bargaining chip to obtain benefits. But that might mean we have to sacrifice one or the other. I do think there should be no compromise: give us what we deserve! Countrywide! Worldwide!"

Revelinda, a neurosurgical unit RN, expressed anger at Kaiser's statement, which called the strike "unjustified" and described the strikers as "the best paid nurses in Southern California."

"That's a lie! Our wages are very low compared to other RNs. We have a problem of poor staffing: we are supposed to have a 3:1 patient-nurse ratio. But because of understaffing we get four patients each. This is unsafe. Sometimes they won't even give us a reliever, effectively denying our right to a break."

She pointed at serious medical conditions she developed because of such work conditions. "I got acute gastritis because of that. My doctor had to prescribe me meds otherwise I'd develop ulcers. I have no time to even eat. On top of that, last January I had a lumpectomy. My doctor told me a major factor of cancer is stress.

"This is a case of corporate greed. Capitalism is the bad part. My neurosurgical patients can go critical any time, we are in the trenches taking care of them and don't even get a fair contract."

Nimfa has been a Kaiser RN for 36 years and works in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). She noted, "This is Kaiser's flagship hospital, priding itself for quality nursing awards. Right, we are at the frontline making sure we give the best care. Yet, what is the 'thank you' we get? Understaffing, equipment shortage and

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inadequacy. We have telemetry boxes that are so hard to operate I injured a finger.

“Management says we are greedy! ICU nurses here get $20 per hour less than other RNs in the same company. At least we want to be at par with the rest of the medical community. Instead they're making us the benchmark. It’s not just about wages, health benefits have also been cut.

“We’ve seen Kaiser give with one hand to take with the other. We need breaks, so to give us relievers they take from other equally important areas. So we end up relieving each other, violating Title 22 because now we have four patients [each] to take care of. We’re watching the bargaining table carefully, the union should not compromise on any of the issues.”

Jennifer, a pediatric ICU nurse, told the WSWS, “When I first started here it wasn’t nearly as bad. Now we have to cover each other for breaks and that’s not the best for our patients. We don’t have resources or helpers to cover patients. We get temp nurses, nothing against them, but it's not the same level of care when you don’t know the process day in, day out and only get a two-day orientation.

“I really hope CNA will not compromise. From what I understand they’ve hammered out a lot of the contract without giving anything up. Now let’s get the last financial leg of this contract down. Are we going to be giving up our medical benefits or our pensions? We’re fighting to not give up those things. As nurses you’d think we'd at least have access to medical care for our families and ourselves!”

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