

Five-day strike of Kaiser Permanente mental health workers ends

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Health care workers at Kaiser Permanente hospitals concluded their strike this week with a series of limited pickets throughout California. The National Union of Health Care Workers (NUHW) held a rally at the state capitol in Sacramento calling for greater state oversight of the hospital chain.

At issue in the strike were the lengthy wait times patients endure before seeing a therapist. Fred Seavey, a research director with the NUHW, told the *Sacramento Bee* that Kaiser had been fined by the Department of Managed Health Care (DMHC) for systemic failures to ensure access for first-time patients.

Seavey said, “We did a survey of therapists across the state at Kaiser in the spring, 71 percent reported that wait times for return treatment appointments among their patients has grown worse not better during the past two years,” adding, “Nearly four of five therapists practicing in psychology said that daily, they must schedule their patients for return treatment appointments longer than is clinically appropriate.”

The DMHC stated earlier in the week that Kaiser would be monitored to provide timely care despite the strike and would be monitored in the coming weeks as well.

The NUHW started the five-day strike earlier in the week, which had been approved by 80 percent of its 4000 members. Some 88 percent of the nurses rejected Kaiser’s last and final offer. As planned by the union, the strike ended without any new contract proposal.

While workers on the picket line showed courage and determination to defend their jobs and patients, the NUHW collaborated with Kaiser to prevent other sections of the working class from joining and expanding the struggle. The depolarable conditions experienced by mental health workers are shared by nurses, technicians, janitors and all the other workers

who make the hospital run.

Instead of organizing a joint strike and an appeal to the broader working class, the NUHW directed its membership to the Democratic Party in rallies at Sacramento and Los Angeles. Kaiser, like other health insurers, has made enormous profits since the launch of the Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare. The flagship health care legislation of the Democratic Party gave insurers a captive market, which saw Kaiser’s enrollees jump from 8.9 million in 2011 to 12.2 million at the end of 2018. Kaiser has made billions of dollars in income each year by keeping labor costs low through understaffing and underserving these patients.

The WSWS spoke to nurses and their supporters outside a Kaiser Permanente hospital in San Diego.

Clifford, a mental health worker at Kaiser, said, “The main issue is staffing. Our patients have to wait one to two months to receive care. We need more staff, and we need Kaiser to hire more therapists.

“We were originally set to strike weeks ago, but didn’t after the CEO died. Some of the Kaiser leadership hold us responsible for his death.

“Everytime we go on strike, Kaiser spends millions on scabs. They’re paying them many times more than we get paid. They take out ads, fly in people from across the country on last minute flights, spending enormous amounts.”

Clifford described the unique challenges his staff faces in Southern California, saying, “The bilingual staff has to deal with double the workload. We see our patients struggle with the fear of being undocumented, especially with the rise of the Trump administration.”

Marc, a therapist with 20 years experience at Kaiser told the WSWS, “I’m booked up till March until my next patient. We have had many suicides because

Kaiser won't staff us, but even less extreme stuff happens all the time, like people missing work and other commitments.

“We lost our pensions in 2014, it's now a 401k. They wanted to get rid of my staff to save money. We've seen our case loads increase, they now want 10 percent to be telephone calls only. I've had patients who didn't even know they had telephone appointments.

“We need scheduled management time to help our patients. They've outsourced so many of the less serious patients, we're so overwhelmed by all the serious cases that we get burned out.

“People are suffering tremendously on a daily basis. You shouldn't have to wait four months to see a therapist.”

Clarissa came to the rally with her family in memory of her late sister who committed suicide despite being enrolled with Kaiser Permanente.

“My sister was 17 when she passed in 2014. Her first suicide attempt was in 2013. She was placed in a drug treatment program even though she had no history of that. She was put on antidepressants. She was in an isolated treatment center in Long Beach, basically juvenile hall, worsening her problems.

“She was confined 15 times in six weeks. She didn't have any immediate on-site therapist. Her medication caused illnesses. We knew she was getting bad care. A few months later she passed away.

“Following her passing, a lot of her friends fell victim to depression and reached out to Kaiser and received the same treatment. It's easier for Kaiser to pay off lawsuits than hire more therapists.

“There's a lot of nurses who have sons and daughters who are dealing with mental health issues and they don't want to be retaliated against and lose coverage, so they're crossing the picket line. Everyone needs to go on strike. They are calling in extra people to make up for the people striking. Our chant is mental health not corporate wealth.”



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