

Northern California Sutter health care workers join Kaiser Permanente engineers on strike

Evan Winters, Sebastian Greene
4 October 2021

Three hundred and fifty hospital technicians, respiratory therapists, dieticians, and clerical workers began a five-day strike yesterday at a Sutter Health hospital in Antioch, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area, after voting down the company's "last, best, and final offer." These workers join more than 700 Kaiser Permanente stationary and biomedical engineers across 24 Northern California locations who have been on strike since September 18.

Sutter workers are fighting against understaffing and overwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as below-inflation pay proposals in one of the most expensive areas in the country. Sutter's proposal includes a 3 percent wage increase for the first three years of the contract, with a 4 percent raise in the fourth year. Inflation is currently over 5 percent, making the company's proposal an effective pay cut. Contract highlights provided by Sutter to the media do not mention any increases in staffing to reduce workloads, workers' primary demand.

Kaiser Permanente is offering only a 2 percent wage increase, supplemented with bonuses that will not accrue into base pay, and is similarly demanding that its existing engineers make up for staffing shortfalls. Stationary engineers and biomedical engineers service and maintain the hospital's mechanical systems including heating, air-conditioning and ventilation equipment, boilers, electrical and emergency generators, and the hospital's medical equipment. Kaiser's proposal would allow the company to force workers to travel to other counties to work on other Kaiser medical buildings, further allowing the company to cut personnel and costs.

In both cases, the union gave management ample

warning to allow it to hire scabs, which have been brought in in both cases. The SEIU gave Sutter 10 days' notice. In an October 1 announcement, Kaiser stated that it has made "extensive preparations" to minimize the impact of an engineers' strike by bringing in scabs from Kaiser Permanente facilities across the country and supplementing with contracted "equipment specialists." Continued operation of the hospital would not be possible if the nurses' unions and other health care unions were not ordering their members to cross the picket lines. Thus, all health care unions involved are conspiring with the companies to ensure the strike has as little effect as possible on the hospital's operations.

Health care unions have a long history of utilizing isolated stunt strikes to wear down militant workers and force through pro-company contracts. Such was the case with the Sutter nurses' struggle of 2011–2013, which began with a one-day strike by 23,000 workers in February 2011. By November 2012, the California Nurses Association had already forced through a sellout contract at most locations, calling out only 3,200 nurses in a one-day strike at seven Northern California Sutter Health facilities. Each time, the union gave the company advance notice to ensure it could acquire the necessary scabs, sometimes for periods substantially longer than the actual duration of the strike. In May 2013, 3,100 remaining nurses were called out for a weeklong strike before ultimately accepting the concessions demanded by the company.

Today, the SEIU has already pushed through the Sutter contract for over 3,000 other workers, leaving the Antioch workers isolated.

Health care workers must not let their struggle be left

in the hands of the SEIU and the IUOE, run by well-paid, pro-company bureaucrats that run them. They must adopt a new strategy to break out of the unions' stranglehold, based on mobilizing the independent strength of the working class as a whole.

Powerful battalions of health care workers are entering into struggle after fighting for a year and a half on the front lines against COVID-19 without adequate support. Twenty-four thousand California Kaiser Permanente workers in the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of HealthCare Professionals union, including nurses, pharmacists, rehab therapists, midwives and optometrists, will vote on strike authorization this week. Additionally, roughly 3,400 nurses and other health care workers at Kaiser Permanente in Oregon, under the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP), could vote to strike as soon as next week.

Elsewhere in the country, more than 2,000 nurses and other health care workers struck Friday in Buffalo, New York, joining Worcester, Massachusetts, nurses, who have been on strike for more than 28 weeks in their fight for safe staffing.

Health care workers are confronted with the need to unify and coordinate their struggles on a national scale, something the unions are doing everything possible to prevent. In response, Sutter Health and Kaiser Permanente health care workers must follow the example of autoworkers at Volvo and Dana and form democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the pro-company trade unions, to fight for their demands and build up lines of communication with other workers. These demands should include increases in staffing, substantial raises, no cuts to benefits, and full provision of necessary personal protective equipment.

These committees should make appeals to other health care workers, at their workplaces, in other health care systems in Northern California, and to their brothers and sisters across the country and internationally.

Such appeals will get a response. In Oakland, California, waste management employees refused to cross the picket line at at least one Kaiser facility. If nurses or doctors did the same, the multibillion-dollar "non-profit" health care companies would be brought to their knees.

Health care workers should make appeals to workers in other sectors, including and especially educators. The current policy of Democrats and Republicans alike is to force open schools and businesses, resulting in mass infection of the population and forcing health care workers and educators to conduct damage control.

In opposition to the Democrats and Republicans, the Socialist Equality Party calls for an eradication strategy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. With a lockdown of just two months, transmission could be brought down to traceable levels that could be identified and quarantined with sufficient surveillance testing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* stands ready to assist workers in building rank-and-file committees. For more information, visit wsws.org/workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact