

Nursing staff at Kaiser Permanente hospitals in Oregon begin strike authorization vote

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On October 4, over 3,400 nurses and other health care workers at Kaiser Permanente hospitals in Portland, Oregon began a week-long vote to authorize a strike. The Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (OFNHP), affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), called the strike vote after the expiration of the two-year contract on September 30.

If they strike, the Kaiser workers in Oregon would join 350 hospital technicians, respiratory therapists, dieticians and clerical workers in California, at Sutter Health in Antioch and in the San Francisco Bay Area, who struck this week after voting down the company's "last, best, and final offer."

These Sutter workers join more than 700 Kaiser Permanente stationary and biomedical engineers across 24 Northern California locations who have been on strike since September 18. Also striking are 100 workers in the dietary, housekeeping and linen departments of McKenzie-Willamette Medical Center in Eugene, Oregon, members of SEIU Local 49. Meanwhile, in California, 24,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses are scheduled to vote on strike action soon.

Kaiser administrators have been in national bargaining in tandem with OFNHP and their counterparts in other regions, representing a total of 52,000 workers in eight states, since April. Kaiser has proposed a two-tier system in which new health care workers would be hired at lower wages and with diminished benefits.

Kaiser nurses in Portland are fighting to receive fair compensation for their hard and hazardous work through the course of the pandemic amid chronic staffing shortages. The *Oregonian* newspaper reported in July that Kaiser was offering an \$8,000 signing bonus to emergency department nurses willing to work

nights.

The union is reportedly seeking a 4 percent wage increase across the board. Joshua Holt, chair of OFNHP's registered nurses bargaining unit, told the *Oregonian* that under Kaiser's last offer workers in Oregon would stand to receive an estimated 1 percent wage increase—which would raise the pay rate for many existing nurses by only about 50 cents.

Health care workers across the United States and internationally are reporting record levels of stress caring for patients in the pandemic without adequate staff, supplies and support. A survey of Kaiser Permanente resident nurses in the state showed that 42 percent of them are considering leaving the profession due to burnout from the pandemic.

Workers hope a better contract will help increase staffing amid the loss of employees due to COVID-related burnout. One Kaiser employee wrote on Twitter, "I'm voting yes on Monday [for a strike] because as I see it, we can't live up to our promises to our patients at current staffing levels."

There are currently 3,286 new confirmed and presumptive cases of COVID-19 in Oregon, bringing the state's total to 334,971, with an official death toll of 3,823, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Kaiser workers must be warned that the OFNHP has a history of sellout deals claimed as victories, as recently as April of this year. A recent contract for 156 health care workers at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Oregon after an 11-day strike imposed a "market-based" pay structure completely in line with the hospital administration's demands.

However, the potential exists for nurses at Kaiser Permanente, the largest managed care organization in the US, to win support from fellow health care workers, as well as teachers, grocery and food workers, and the

broader working class.

Millions of health care workers in the US and globally want to fight for decent compensation and safe working conditions. This fight will not be waged by unions or establishment political parties but requires building independent rank-and-file organizations democratically controlled by workers themselves. This is the only successful way forward to overcome the threatened sabotage of their struggle by the OFNHP and the entire trade union apparatus.



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