

Northern California hospital engineers' walkout enters fourth week

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The strike by over 700 stationary and biomedical engineers at 24 Northern California Kaiser Permanente hospitals entered its fourth week this past Saturday, October 9. The engineers are fighting against effective pay cuts and contract provisions that would allow Kaiser to send engineers to facilities across county lines to avoid addressing staffing issues.

Despite an overwhelming strike vote yesterday by 24,000 California Kaiser health care workers, the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) has worked systematically to isolate the striking engineers in an attempt to impose the multibillion-dollar “nonprofit” health care giant’s demands.

Jeffrey, a stationary engineer at the Kaiser Permanente hospital in Santa Clara, explained why he is out on strike. “I’ve been in facilities in Local 39 since 2004. This is the first time I’ve been on strike.

“We’re just doing what we feel we have to do to get the deal we need to survive, because Santa Clara is a really expensive place to live. My rent is like \$4,000 a month. I’m a single dad with three kids. I have a car payment. I have rent, I have utilities, I have an ex-wife that I have to pay. I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do, if it means standing out here for three weeks.”

Jeffrey explained the critical role of a stationary engineer. “We make the hospital run, all the power, all the plumbing.”

Even before the strike, the Santa Clara hospital was short five stationary engineers out of a proper staffing level of 30 for the 19 buildings in the complex. Strikers expressed skepticism that scabs brought in by Kaiser would be able to properly maintain equipment and systems. “I’m pretty sure when it comes back, there’ll be unlimited overtime,” Jeffrey noted. “I’m pretty sure the scabs are sitting in there saying, ‘I guess the building hasn’t imploded yet, so I guess we’re in the

clear.’ So basically, they’re in there doing nothing, getting paid \$60 an hour.”

Picketing strikers at the Santa Clara and Redwood City Kaiser hospitals were surprised to learn of the preceding week’s five-day strike of 350 hospital technicians, respiratory therapists, dieticians and clerical workers at the Sutter Health hospital in Antioch, California, roughly an hour’s drive away. Jeffrey explained that the IUOE had claimed a week or two prior that “the deal was done. It was inked and on the way.”

In fact, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) was able to push through the contract for about 3,000 workers in Sutter. It only allowed more militant workers at Antioch to strike once the union calculated they were sufficiently isolated.

What’s more, the five-day strike at Sutter Health was calculated to end only days before the October 10 conclusion of a strike authorization vote for 24,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses, pharmacists, rehab therapists, midwives and optometrists, represented by United Nurses Associations of California/Union of HealthCare Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) union, approved by an overwhelming 96 percent margin in an October 11 announcement.

Roughly 3,400 nurses and other health care workers at Kaiser Permanente in Oregon, under the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals are also currently voting on strike authorization.

Strikers who spoke to the WSWs had also not been informed of ongoing health care strikes in Buffalo, New York, as well as Worcester, Massachusetts, not to mention strikes at Kellogg foods and contract struggles at manufacturers John Deere and Dana Inc.

This illustrates the role of each of the unions in isolating workers from each other.

“They keep us in the dark as much as possible and they have literally told us that,” explained Jeffrey. “They came out into the open and told us, ‘We don’t give you any more information than we absolutely have to until we absolutely have to.’”

“A lot of guys think you get protection in a union. There is no protection in a union. Protection is an illusion; it’s all just smoke and mirrors.”

Jeffrey continued, “There are at least probably six or more unions in this hospital,” highlighting the way separate contracts and expiration dates are used to keep workers divided. “All these unions, like the nursing union, signed a no-strike clause. Then they can’t go out on strike with us or for us or anything else.”

When a WSWs reporter explained that the contracts for 24,000 Kaiser nurses and other health care workers is no longer in effect, allowing them to strike, Jeffrey expressed enthusiasm.

Asked about an eradication strategy to fight COVID-19, Jeffrey explained, “I had COVID, and I was absolutely the sickest I have ever been in my entire life. I’m not going to say I almost died because I didn’t, but I was the sickest I’ve been in my entire life. I was hospitalized for 24 hours, and I literally laid in bed for three weeks. It took everything I had to get up and walk eight steps to the restroom.”

Striking stationary and biomedical engineers are in a powerful position to win major gains. With a strike authorized for 24,000 California health care workers, a united strike could have a big impact. Health care workers must recognize that the unions that claim to represent them are deeply hostile to such a fight, which would undercut their close relations with management. That said, the UNAC/UHCP can no longer hide behind a no-strike clause, as their contract is no longer in force. The fact that they continue to order their members to cross the engineers’ picket lines is a damning indictment of the union.

We call on all Kaiser health care workers, particularly striking stationary and biomedical engineers and nurses and others who just voted to authorize a strike, to form rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to both the company and the pro-management unions who have kept them isolated and divided for decades. These committees should demand an immediate united strike, raising demands including full staffing levels, a significant increase in pay, and

adequate personally protective equipment to protect workers from the aerosolized COVID-19 virus.

Furthermore, these committees should fight for an eradication approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. The burden of the Democrats’ and Republicans’ policies of reopening the economy and causing mass infection is borne disproportionately by health care workers, who are currently forced to cancel life-saving procedures due to COVID-19 even in supposedly safe areas, such as the San Francisco Bay Area.

As part of the fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) are holding an online webinar titled, “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication,” featuring leading public health experts as well as rank-and-file workers and parents fighting to end this entirely preventable, ongoing catastrophe.

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



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