

Kaiser workers left in dark after overwhelming strike vote at largest US “non-profit” health care provider

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On October 11, 24,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses and health care workers in the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) voted by an overwhelming 96 percent to authorize a strike. Despite this nearly unanimous vote, the union leadership is keeping its membership in the dark on when or if a strike will happen, and the union is simply telling them that they are “continuing negotiations.”

The UNAC/UHCP leadership is, in fact, buying executives at Kaiser Permanente vital time to hire strikebreakers and gather resources to weather a strike. The rank-and-file workers of Kaiser, who are the ones willing to put everything on the line to strike, are not having their basic questions answered while they continue on the job with no contract during a pandemic.

Kaiser Permanente workers in Southern California would have powerful support if they went on strike. More than 1,500 pharmacists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists at Kaiser in California and Hawaii, also members of UNAC/UHCP, are holding a strike authorization vote on October 24-28, with results expected to be released October 29. These workers are facing the same threat of a two-tier wage system and Kaiser executives’ callous indifference to dangerously low staffing ratios, especially when the nationwide nursing shortage is taken into account.

The health care workers are pushing for a strike amid the largest potential strike wave in 40 years in America. Already, 39 strikes are taking place involving 24,000 workers, including several thousand health care workers across the country and 10,000 workers at John Deere, according to statistics compiled by Cornell

University.

At Sutter Delta, a hospital in Antioch, California, 350 workers conducted a five-day strike that was ended by the SEIU only a few days before the Kaiser strike authorization vote, before workers had the chance to see the new agreement. There is also an ongoing strike of over 700 stationary and biomedical engineers at 24 Kaiser hospitals in Northern California. The large unions conduct business on a local-by-local basis in order to purposely fracture the membership and isolate these struggles.

But despite the massive public support a strike would gain, the UNAC/UHCP is demanding only 4 percent annual pay raises that are well under inflation.

On the UNAC/UHCP Facebook page on Monday, union leaders gave their second “update” on a strike notice, saying that “bargaining will continue through this week. Updates will be provided. Let’s stay united for our patients and our professions.” In an attempt to placate rank-and-file outrage and bide for time, the unions have organized a “March for the Future of HealthCare” for October 30.

Kaiser workers are speaking out against the conspiracy of silence by the unions. One worker commented: “Our members are losing faith. We have all the advantage here, but we are not using it. Our union leaders are our representation and so far, 96 percent are willing to strike. Prolonging this is not our intention. This tactic gives Kaiser the advantage. We are losing faith and if that happens, it’s the end of it all, including the longevity of this Union. Integrity is everything. We have to do our true intentions: strike to fight for our rights!”

Another commented: “This is beginning to feel like

UNAC is working with Kaiser instead of US? No answers to any questions ... Have not given Kaiser the 10 day notice ... We are just sitting here not knowing what's going on here ... LIKE REALLY????

On the Facebook event page for the October 30 march, one Kaiser worker said: “I don’t understand this? You want us to march, but we are in the dark and can’t get a 10 day strike call?”

This attempt to defy the strike vote by Kaiser workers is the product of the complete corporatist integration of the unions with Kaiser management. After a 1997 strike by 7,500 nurses, the unions at Kaiser approached management to form an organization called the Labor Management Partnership (LMP), whose explicit goal, according to its website, is to eliminate a “traditional approach”—strikes—“and launching a campaign against KP that ultimately could damage the organization.”

The LMP is, in fact, based on class collaboration and the subordination of the workforce to the dictates and profits of Kaiser. But in spite of repeated claims of the supposed “common interests” between management and the workforce, Kaiser is demanding a two-tier wage system and offering only 1 percent annual raises, even as its net revenue increased 47 percent to \$5 billion in the first six months of 2021.

In a message to workers, the hospital explicitly threatened to operate its facilities with scab labor in the event of a strike. “We ask that our employees reject a call to walk away from the patients who need them. Our priority is to continue to provide our members with high-quality, safe care. In the event of any kind of work stoppage, our facilities will be staffed by our physicians along with trained and experienced managers and contingency staff.”

The WSWS spoke to workers at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego. “We are going out of ratio almost every day. Everything is so busy we have patients in the halls,” one nurse said. “We also break each other out, which is very dangerous.” This means that if a nurse wants to take a break, another nurse who already has patients watches or covers for him or her. Referred to as the “buddy system,” the practice is a recipe for disaster because it doubles patient load and places nurses in impossible situations.

Another nurse said, “It’s ridiculous Kaiser is only offering a 1 percent raise. They have made record profits throughout the pandemic, and they want to give

us 1 percent. It’s insulting.” When asked whether the unions are in the pocket of management, the nurse agreed, “Yes, absolutely,” adding, “We do not want the two-tier system, having the person next to you making less than you doing the same job isn’t right.”

The fight of workers at Kaiser, the largest “non-profit” in the country, is intrinsically linked to the fight to eradicate COVID-19. Horrific conditions in the hospitals are the direct result of the ruling class policy of “letting it rip” and acceptance of “living with the virus.” This is a brutal policy aimed against health care workers who stand to suffer most from the consequences of allowing COVID-19 to become endemic.

The health care workers at Kaiser Permanente are in a powerful position. For their struggle to be successful, however, they must form rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-corporatist unions that isolate them from their fellow workers.

The WSWS urges health care workers to take the lead in the fight against COVID-19 and attend the October 24 webinar “How to end the pandemic,” which will feature a distinguished panel of scientists and epidemiologists and explain the case for the global elimination and potential eradication of COVID-19.



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