

Strikes planned by 100,000 Kaiser health care workers to begin next week

Brian Dixon

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Only days before a strike deadline for nearly 32,000 Kaiser Permanente workers on November 15, job actions by tens of thousands of other Kaiser workers on the west coast have been announced. This means that roughly 100,000 Kaiser workers might participate in strike action next week, in what would be a major development of the growing strike wave across the United States.

Around 2,500 pharmacy employees will go on strike on November 18 at over 150 Southern California Kaiser Permanente facilities. The pharmacy workers include pharmacy techs, pharmacy assistants, and pharmacy interns. They have faced increased workloads over the pandemic, including providing curbside pickup and home deliveries, and staffing shortages. Like 2,500 health care workers at Kaiser's Georgia facilities, where workers voted recently to authorize a strike, the pharmacy workers are in the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

More than 700 stationary and biomedical engineers at Kaiser have already been on strike for over eight weeks in northern California. The engineers are fighting against effective pay cuts and contract provisions that would allow Kaiser to send engineers to facilities across county lines, rather than address staffing issues.

The Service Employees International Union–United Health Workers (SEIU–UHW) has called for a 24-hour sympathy strike by 58,000 workers on November 18. The SEIU members, comprising some of the poorest paid hospital staff from cafeteria workers to janitorial staff, are interested in fighting after more than 18 months on the frontlines of a pandemic.

Sympathy strikes, once common in the United States, have essentially disappeared for decades as the unions have become integrated with management and worked to eliminate strikes and enforce concessions. Indeed,

the SEIU itself has been forcing its members to cross the picket lines of the engineers for two months, which has no doubt produced immense frustration and anger among workers. The calling of a statewide 24-hour sympathy strike is a clear indication that the SEIU is worried that it is on the verge of losing control of the situation, and it is calling a limited strike in a bid to prevent more general action that escapes the union's control.

After decades of attacks on living and working conditions and now having experienced the horrors of the pandemic, which continues to drag on, the health care giant faces a looming war with nurses, pharmacy staff, engineers, cafeteria and janitorial workers.

For decades, the job of the well-heeled trade union bureaucracy has been to prevent, disrupt and isolate struggles in order to enforce concessions. Kaiser has relied heavily on the labor-policing services provided by the union, codified in the Labor-Management Partnership (LMP) established after a 1997 strike. On its website, the LMP explicitly declares that it was formed, at the initiative of the unions, in order to prevent strikes that “threatened to derail the organization.”

This was acknowledged in a statement by Arlene Peasnell, senior vice president of human resources at Kaiser Permanente, who stated that Kaiser is “indisputably one of the most labor-friendly organizations in the United States.” By “labor-friendly,” Peasnell is referring to the bureaucratic apparatus of the trade unions working hand-in-glove with the employers.

However, if the unions fail to prevent or quickly suppress a strike, Kaiser is ready to bring in inexperienced replacement workers as strikebreakers paid at considerably higher rates, who, unfamiliar with

systems, technology, and protocol, often put patients at risk.

“If a strike actually occurs,” Peasnell said, highlighting the fact that the union and the company are furiously working to avert a walkout, “our facilities will be staffed by our trained and experienced managers and emergency staff we are bringing in as needed, and our physicians will continue to be available to care for patients.”

As for the 2,500 pharmacists, the UFCW will do what it can to keep it isolated from Local 770’s 30,000 other members, the Kaiser workers in Georgia and the tens of thousands of other Kaiser workers in other unions who have voted to strike.

This was the UFCW’s strategy in 2003–2004 during the bitter 19-week grocery store strike/lockout of 59,000 workers in southern California, which was the longest work stoppage in the history of the US supermarket industry. The UFCW kept the California workers isolated from striking grocery workers in other states, wearing them down until a concessions contract could be forced through. The contract negotiated included the imposition of a two-tier wage system, increases in medical costs, and no wage increases over the course of the contract. The UFCW did everything possible to prevent the broader mobilization of the working class and ram through the rotten contract against the wishes of the membership.

However, a new mood of determination and militancy is taking hold among workers, who are engaged in the largest strike movement in the United States in decades. Workers at John Deere, IATSE members in the film industry, teachers and others are increasingly rebelling against the treachery of the unions.

Indeed, the fact that the SEIU has been compelled to call a sympathy strike is a significant indication of the enormous potential for a broader movement uniting the entire working class against stagnant wages and the spread of COVID in the workplaces, which the unions have helped to enforce.

The outcome of this struggle depends on workers establishing their own initiative independent of and opposed to the corporatist trade unions. This means building the growing network of rank-and-file-committees, democratically run by workers themselves, to unite with workers in every workplace and across state and national boundaries. This is the only means by

which transnational corporations and health care giants can be fought.



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