

Kaiser workers must take up the fight to eliminate COVID-19!

World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter
12 November 2021

On Monday, 32,000 health care workers at Kaiser will go on strike, barring a last-minute effort by the union to shut it down.

The struggle at Kaiser is part of a broader upsurge of the working class. In California, a one-day sympathy strike of 58,000 hospital workers on November 18 and a strike by 2,500 pharmacists, as well as the ongoing strikes in by 700 stationary and biomedical engineers at Kaiser and 350 workers at Sutter Health, mean that close to 100,000 health care workers may be on strike this week.

In other parts of the country, 700 nurses at Tenet Healthcare in Massachusetts have been on strike for eight months, and 1,000 health care workers in West Virginia have been on strike for more than a week. Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers in Britain, Sri Lanka, Germany, Portugal, Kenya, Pakistan, Canada and elsewhere are also on the move.

Major strikes are also underway in other industries, including by 10,000 John Deere workers, 1,400 Kellogg's cereal workers and 1,100 Warrior Met coal miners. In addition, 60,000 film workers in the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) are voting on a widely unpopular tentative agreement, which if rejected, raises the prospect of a strike that shuts down much of the entertainment industry.

While workers everywhere are fighting to demand wage increases above the rate of inflation, adequate staffing levels and other critical workplace demands, they must also take up the fight against the catastrophe caused by the incompetent and criminal response of the ruling class to the pandemic.

Healthcare workers have worked for over a year and a half under warlike conditions in hospitals, and nurses are leaving their profession at an unprecedented rate, citing low pay, overwork, and trauma. Similar tragedies have taken place at auto plants, schools and other workplaces throughout the world.

The demands by Kaiser for massive cuts in real wages, with a pay increase five points below current inflation, and the creation of a new second tier of nurses making 30

percent less, is nothing short of criminal. These measures will lower the standard of care amid a pandemic as more experienced nurses are forced out and replaced with cheaper replacements. The consequences can be measured in human lives.

The “non-profit” hospital chain, which made \$5 billion last year, would much rather spend this money on executive compensation than on health care.

The demands by Kaiser are only a particularly grotesque expression of a general policy pursued by the entire capitalist oligarchy. Their aim, put bluntly, is to sacrifice human life for profit. While hospitals have been starved of funds and public health programs are all but non-existent, trillions of dollars have been funneled into the banks and Wall Street. In almost every country, the line is that workers must remain on the job, where millions will get sick and die, in the name of profit.

This is why the fight for better wages and staffing at Kaiser is inseparably bound up with fight to end the pandemic. As long as the pandemic rages, hospitals will be overwhelmed with the sick and dying with each new surge. More nurses, burned out and traumatized by having to treat patients without necessary staffing and resources, will continue to leave the profession, creating even worse staffing shortages. Meanwhile, more people will get sick and die in schools and workplaces.

The looming winter surge across the world exposes the complete failure not only of the “herd immunity” policy of deliberately promoting mass infection by Trump and the extreme right, but also the vaccine-only mitigation strategy pursued by the Biden administration. Vaccines, while critical, are not a magic bullet, and vaccination programs focused in the “developed” countries have allowed the virus to continue to spread and mutate in poorer countries.

Vaccines must be combined with a comprehensive international strategy, including universal masks, contact tracing, air filtration and lockdowns of nonessential production, with full compensation for laid-off workers, to eliminate the virus that causes COVID-19 once and for all.

Instead, the world's governments are moving in the opposite direction. In spite of the winter surge, which is already underway, they are pressing ahead with eliminating all remaining restrictions, including reopening schools and removing whatever is left of masking and social distancing measures. The line is that the pandemic will "inevitably" become endemic, with mass death a regular feature of life for years to come.

But there is nothing inevitable about the continued spread of the pandemic. Scientists and epidemiologists have shown that, were aggressive public health measures implemented, the virus could be eliminated within several months. The fight for such measures, however, must be based on the working class, in alliance with medical scientists who are being increasingly sidelined because they oppose allowing the virus to become endemic.

The Kaiser strike has the potential to develop into a broader movement of the working class to fight for an elimination strategy. But this requires that workers have new organizations independent of the official trade unions, who have helped the ruling class keep workers on the job, prevent strikes and conceal the extent of the spread in workplaces. The American Federation of Teachers and its president Randi Weingarten have even promoted right-wing junk science to falsely claim to parents and educators that the reopening of schools is safe.

The unions fight not to unite workers, but to divide them. The health care unions have isolated one strike after another this year, including in Worcester, Massachusetts, where management is hiring permanent replacements. They are also seeking to prevent a strike at Kaiser's facilities nationwide, instructing thousands of Kaiser workers in Georgia to stay on the job, in spite of a massive strike authorization vote.

At Kaiser, the unions bear responsibility for enforcing the disastrous conditions in the hospitals through their participation in the Labor Management Partnership, a corporatist entity whose stated aim is the prevention of strikes. In contract talks, they are not even calling for wage increases that keep pace with the rate of inflation, "demanding" only a measly 4 percent.

The fact that strikes have now been called at Kaiser, more than a month after the expiration of the previous contract, is an indication of the powerful desire for a broader struggle by health care workers. But having been forced to make a partial retreat, calling strikes and sympathy strikes in order to avoid completely losing control of the situation, the unions are still working behind the scenes with management in a bid to enforce a sellout. There is no guarantee, moreover, that the union will not announce a new deal at the 11th hour and call off the strike, as the IATSE union did last

month to prevent a strike among film workers.

Workers can fight against both the attacks by the hospital chains and the treachery of the unions. This requires that they develop their own independent initiative by forming a rank-and-file strike committee to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions.

A rank-and-file committee will be based not on the acceptance of the "right" of corporations to make a profit, but of fighting for the unity of the entire working class against inequality, poverty and the coronavirus pandemic. It must raise economic demands based on what workers need, not what Kaiser is willing to part with, including:

- Annual 10 percent wage increases, together with cost-of-living increases to protect against inflation
- Adequate staffing levels, set and enforced by nurses and health care workers themselves
- The elimination of all wage and benefit tiers, with all workers brought to the top tier
- The enforcement of contractually-mandated breaks

A Kaiser Rank-and-File Strike Committee would form part of a growing network of these organizations around the world. Rank-and-file committees played the crucial role in the mobilization of opposition to a sellout contract from the United Auto Workers at John Deere, and members of committees across the country have come together to form a Solidarity Rank-and-File Committee to help Deere strikers resist the UAW-imposed isolation of their struggle.

Other committees have played similar roles at auto parts company Dana, Volvo Trucks, Amazon and countless school districts around the world. They are coalescing into a broad international network, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to plan and prepare for joint action on a world scale.

The *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Worker Newsletter* stands ready to assist Kaiser workers in building a committee. To get started, contact us today by clicking on the link below.



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