

Health care unions call off Kaiser strike, announce four-year agreement with real wage cuts

Katy Kinner, Tom Hall
14 November 2021

Early Saturday morning, the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Healthcare Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) called off a strike of 32,000 West Coast nurses and other health care workers which had been set to begin on Monday. The union announced a sellout deal which contains wage increases below inflation and other regressive measures.

The deal, which would last for four years, covers workers at 14 West Coast hospitals and hundreds of more clinics and medical offices. The cancellation of Monday's indefinite strike leaves isolated 2,500 Kaiser pharmacists who, as of this writing, do not have an agreement and are still due to begin a separate strike on Monday. It also isolates the ongoing two-month-long strike by 700 Kaiser engineers in Northern California. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which had called a 24-hour sympathy strike of more than 50,000 hospital workers in the state of California, has now canceled half of that strike, although workers in Northern California will still strike on November 18 in support of the Kaiser engineers.

Saturday's move is the latest betrayal by the unions in the United States, which are working to sabotage a growing movement by workers against wage stagnation and unsafe working conditions. It came less than 12 hours after the United Auto Workers (UAW) announced it was forcing a snap re-vote of a contract at John Deere which workers had already voted to reject last month. While the UAW is forcing workers to vote in only three days' time in a bid to cram through the deal and shut down a month-long strike by 10,000 Deere workers, the Kaiser unions are reportedly dragging out the voting process over the next three to four weeks in order to bleed off workers' momentum.

The UNAC/UHCP are using the same playbook used by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees

(IATSE) union to prevent a strike last month by 60,000 television production workers. IATSE also canceled a strike right before it was due to begin by announcing a sellout agreement of its own, which IATSE member are voting on this weekend.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the widest possible rejection of this sellout deal. However, Kaiser workers must also begin now to build their own organized, independent initiative by founding a Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee. This organization would provide workers with the means to oppose the treachery of the unions and appeal for the broadest possible support among workers, many of whom are also fighting against the betrayals of the unions in their own workplaces.

At UNAC/UHCP local meetings Saturday, union officials announced that all nurses must return to their scheduled shifts without even seeing the text of the tentative agreement. However, the "highlights" discussed at the meetings indicate that the contract pushes through significant wage cuts when inflation is factored in.

This includes 3 percent wage increases in the first two years, which will drop to a 2 percent wage increase in the last two years. Given the fact that inflation is currently 6.2 percent and still on the rise, this amounts to a significant pay cut in each year of the contract. The compensation package also includes lump sum bonuses equal to 2 percent of annual wages, but only for the last two years of the contract.

Perhaps the most shameful concession in the tentative agreement is an incentive bonus to discourage nurses from taking sick leave. Beginning in the third year of the deal, a \$2,000 bonus as part of Kaiser's "affordability mission" requires that nurses do not use more than one out of their 10 allotted sick days in a year.

This is especially grotesque under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, which governments are declaring will become “endemic” for years to come as a result of their failure to contain the disease. However, even assuming that the pandemic has ended by 2023, this will greatly worsen burnout rates among nurses, which have grown to new heights as a result of the stressful working conditions for the last two years. Roughly two-thirds of all ICU nurses, according to one recent survey, are considering quitting their profession.

Lastly, in another cost-saving move for Kaiser, the deal will eliminate training reimbursement for nurses, who will have to obtain in-house training available at appointed times outside of their regular shifts.

The unions are absurdly claiming “victory” on the basis that the new tentative agreement does not include the two-tier wage structure and the even lower 1 percent wage increases originally demanded by Kaiser. There is no reason to assume that the claim that two-tier wages have been eliminated are true—similar claims were made by the UAW in 2019 about a contract for the Detroit automakers which in fact expanded temporary workers as a de facto third tier. However, assuming it is true, the fact that such deep concessions were demanded by management was likely a negotiating ploy to smooth the path for an eventual contract which contained lesser but still substantial concessions. At any rate, the attendance bonus in the new contract replicates the core function of a two-tier wage structure by creating economic pressure on older, less healthy nurses and nurses with families.

There is no reason to believe vague claims by the union that the contract provides for full staffing—similar “guarantees” have gone unfulfilled at hospitals around the country. Moreover, the attendance bonus heavily suggests that management has no intention of fully staffing its facilities, and instead wants to wring out as much work from its existing workforce as possible.

New details reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* suggest that even before the strike had been announced, the Kaiser unions were working behind the scenes to assist with management’s strikebreaking plans.

In mid-September, weeks before the old agreement even expired on September 30, dozens of contract nurses were hired by management at the Downey Medical Center in Downey, California, just north of Long Beach. Their contracts were “coincidentally” timed to begin on November 15, the same day which the unions, more than a month later, set for the strike deadline. The contract nurses, who are also union members, were unaware that

they were being hired as strikebreakers until a virtual union orientation meeting last week, during which UNAC/UHCP officials instructed them to cross the picket line on Monday.

One of the seasonal workers, who asked to remain anonymous, told the WSWs that she asked her union official what would happen if she reported to the picket line. The official responded by telling her she would lose her job, on the dubious grounds she would still be in her 90-day probationary period.

This is a further demonstration that the official unions are not “unions” at all, but scab organizations in the pockets of management. At Kaiser, this cozy relationship with management has been cemented for decades through the Labor Management Partnership, a corporatist entity whose stated goal on its website is the collaboration between the unions and management to eliminate a “traditional approach,” i.e., strikes.

Striking Kaiser engineers in Northern California spoke to the WSWs Saturday afternoon, hours after the strike in Southern California had been called off. One said: “Nurses should not be exposed to Kaiser’s smoke and mirrors. When they call it tentative, it’s not a final contract, and they haven’t voted. They should join the rest of us in our fight. It’s better in numbers.”

Another engineer, Eliseo, said: “We are fighting for more pay to keep up rising cost of living expenses. ...If we accept a contract that is lower than standard then we would mess up everybody else outside of Kaiser too.

“The hospital is falling apart in there. The workers they hired don’t know the building like we do. A nurse came out to the picket the other day asking us how to reset the nurse call light system.”

When asked what he had to say to the nurses about their tentative agreement, he responded, “Come out and join us, because your contract is next.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact