

“This TA is an insult”: ??Kaiser health care workers respond with outrage to sellout contract announced by unions

Alfred Kurosawa
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The World Socialist Web Site is helping Kaiser workers build a rank-and-file committee to mobilize opposition to the unions' sellout contract. For more information, contact us today by filling out this form.

Kaiser Permanente health care workers are furious over the last-minute cancellation of their strike by the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) over the weekend. The union called off the strike, which would have involved more than 32,000 workers at facilities across Southern California, early Saturday morning upon the announcement of a new tentative agreement which meets none of the workers' demands.

Nearly 100,000 Kaiser workers across the West Coast had been set to strike this week, but the unions have moved rapidly following Saturday's announcement to shut down other planned strikes. The unions called off a strike by 2,500 Kaiser pharmacists on Monday, after announcing a TA there as well.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has also partially walked back a planned 24-hour sympathy strike scheduled for Thursday, which would have included 58,000 workers, mostly janitors, cafeteria workers and other support staff. The SEIU canceled the pickets in Southern California, but strikes are still planned for Northern California in support of 700 Kaiser stationary engineers, who have been on strike for two months—during which time the same SEIU had its members cross the picket line. Another sympathy strike is planned by the California Nurses Association for Friday.

Workers report being blindsided by Saturday's announcement. “I don't know why they're [the UNAC/UHCP] pushing this contract,” one said.

“They're saying it's a ‘victory’—it's awful—and they're calling off the strike before workers have even had a chance to vote on it. They didn't ask us first. Something's going on here. I don't know what, but something's up, and the union and Kaiser are in on it.”

The new contract includes paltry wage increases of 3 percent for the first two years and 2 percent for the final two years of the agreement. Given the current rate of inflation of 6 percent, this amounts to net annual paycuts of 3 and 4 percent, respectively. While the unions are claiming as a victory that the new agreement does not include a new two-tier wage system, it still allows for the hyper-exploitation of nurses and other workers. One particularly regressive measure is an attendance bonus for which nurses will be eligible if they take only one out of their 10 allotted sick days in a year, effectively putting financial pressure on them to work through illnesses and physical and mental exhaustion.

“I think the two-tier wage proposal was never real, and that they used it to give us a bad deal,” suspected one nurse. “It [the TA] is crap. It does nothing to address staffing. Inflation isn't 6 percent, that's just the official figure, it's definitely higher. It's not enough.”

Another said, “My primary concerns are not even the wages but staffing. We have strong staffing language, but there is nothing that actually ensures it gets enforced by Kaiser.” Safe staffing ratios is a major concern of nurses across the country, who are forced to double up to treat patients, particularly during surges of the pandemic. This is a major contributor to stress leading to burnout. One study estimates that for every extra patient that exceeds recommended staffing ratios, a patient's chance of survival decreases by 7 percent.

Initial reporting on the TA by the *World Web Site* has found a wide audience among Kaiser workers. “That article is really great. A few people posted it on our union page. That’s definitely how [we feel],” one said. “I’m voting no because I think the current TA leaves us in the exact same boat where we were before the contract expired. Less than adequate COL increases, and no enforceable safe staffing to keep ourselves and our patients safe. I feel as though the union whipped up a lot of frenzy for a 4 percent wage increase and then tried to act like ‘we won’ when the TA does not include the 4 percent.

“Also, the language for staffing means nothing without a way to hold the employer accountable for their part of that deal. There are no repercussions for not adhering to the staffing language. I’m voting no because we have been through absolute hell and have proven our worth to the health care system and to the employer, and this TA is an insult.

“I am mindful that our union is one of many [in the Alliance of Health Care Unions, a coalition of Kaiser unions] and that the overall bargaining has to look at the greater good, but this does not feel like the greater good after the pandemic that we have worked through. The conditions were overwhelming, emotionally and physically. Nursing has always been and will continue to be a high stress job, but the pandemic added a whole new layer of the unknown, staffing shortages due to illness or burnout, equipment shortages (not just with Kaiser, but worldwide). Nurses are leaving the bedside in droves, which is directly related to burnout and feeling unappreciated and unsupported.”

Another worker had this to say: “The bonuses tied to years 3 and 4 are a hoax. That bonus would be \$2,000 only if you made \$100,000 that year, and even then it will get taxed at about 40 percent.”

She also spoke about the contingency plans by management to break a strike, by hiring contract and travel nurses from all over the country. “Our travelers mentioned several times that if they knew they were hired for a strike, they would not have taken the job. Then they are put in an uncomfortable position as staff around them talk about striking, and they are now worried of how they will manage their own unsafe working conditions since they do not sign up for [that].

“The bonus tied to no sick calls is terrible too. There have been days when I just needed a mental sick day. A

patient passes away, ~~Socialist~~ was draining in every way—emotionally, mentally, physically, etc. And, God forbid, we call off with less than a 24-hour advance notice. So then, no bonus, and I am sitting at our supervisor’s office. They just don’t want to hire more permanent staff. Many of our unit nurses have left, and their positions have not been replaced.

“Many of us are unhappy. It is just not what is fair. I would love to hear the CEO agree to a paycut, and I’ll be happy with what is proposed. We are the backbone who have sacrificed the past year and a half! What they propose is an insult.”



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