

What's in the Kaiser tentative agreement?

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On the morning of Saturday, November 13, Kaiser Permanente and the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) reached an 11th hour deal that averted an indefinite strike of 32,000 health care workers. If the strike at Kaiser had not been called off, it would have been the largest strike in the US since the nationwide strike at General Motors in 2019.

The shutdown of the strike before it had begun is part of an ongoing campaign of sabotage by the unions against a growing movement for strike action to claw back decades of concessions and to fight against unsafe working conditions. The autumn strike wave includes some 10,000 workers currently on strike at John Deere, 1,100 coal miners in Alabama, educators in Scranton Pennsylvania, and thousands of other health care workers.

The day before the Kaiser tentative agreement (TA) was announced, the United Auto Workers had announced it was forcing Deere workers to re-vote on a contract they had already voted to reject, in a bid to shut down the monthlong strike. On Monday afternoon, the IATSE film production workers union declared it had “ratified” a contract covering 60,000 workers which had been rejected by a majority vote of the membership, using an arcane electoral college-style voting procedure. Meanwhile, the cancellation of Kaiser strike leaves isolated a separate strike by 700 Kaiser stationary engineers in Northern California which has been ongoing for the last two months.

The AHCU, an alliance of unions at Kaiser that includes locals of the UNAC/UHCP, AFT, UFCW, USW, the Teamsters, the ILWU and others, has promoted the tentative agreement they reached with Kaiser as an enormous victory. Hal Ruddick, the executive director and chief negotiator for the AHCU, declared, “This was a very hard-won victory, and we could not have done it without dedicated, sustained action by tens of thousands of members. ... We also are grateful for strong leadership from the AFL-CIO and all of our International unions, as well as elected leaders and thousands of members of the public.”

The union’s talking points include “wage increases and wage justice, major staffing improvements, and [the defeat of] two-tier.”

The tentative agreement remains to be ratified by a vote of the membership, which the AHCU is putting off for weeks in order to bleed off workers’ momentum. But what is actually in the tentative agreement? If the unions’ claims are to be believed, the tentative agreement is so truly spectacular that it rendered unnecessary a strike by health care workers which had been ratified by a 96 percent vote of the membership.

First, we should make the disclaimer that the following analysis of the contract may not be totally comprehensive. This is because the “agreement” which was announced is in reality spread across a

bewildering array of 34 separate documents on the union’s website. This is clearly designed to be as impenetrable as possible for workers, who may find that some of the worst provisions may yet be hiding in one of these documents for them to discover in the years to come.

Similar tactics were employed by the UAW in its enforcement of its contracts at the Big Three automakers in 2019. The contract at Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) alone is spread across eight huge volumes, including one entire volume comprised entirely of letters and side agreements. One of these side agreements—which allows Stellantis management to use a “critical status” provision to work employees at a given plant for 90 days straight—went undetected until it was invoked only a few weeks ago by management at the company’s Sterling Heights Assembly Plant near Detroit.

With that caveat out of the way, here is what the *World Socialist Web Site* has uncovered so far.

Wage increases in the agreement, which are scheduled each year from the current year to 2024, vary slightly from local to local but are in the 2 to 3 percent range. However, the majority of workers covered by the agreement can expect a 3 percent raise in 2021 and 2022, and a 2 percent raise in 2023 and 2024. The 2 percent raises will be supplemented by lump-sum bonuses equal to 2 percent of workers’ pay during these years.

As of this writing, the official inflation rate stands at 6.2 percent, making these “raises” effectively a paycut of 3 percent in the first two years and 4 percent in the last two. Moreover, it is widely known that the official inflation underestimates the real cost burden borne by workers, with prices for essentials such as food, rent and transportation rising much faster than the official rate.

Staffing is one of the most important issues to health care workers and to nurses, in particular, as they have been leaving the profession in droves under the enormous physical and mental stress caused by the ruling class’s homicidal response to the pandemic.

But in spite of the unions’ claims that the contract contains major improvements to staffing ratios, the only language to be found around staffing provides for the creation of committees in each region, to be jointly managed by the AHCU and Kaiser, to “address” the issue. Any action taken by these committees requires “mutual agreement.” In other words, the committee is yet another corporatist body, in which Kaiser holds veto power and in which the union is mutually responsible for enforcing staffing ratios acceptable to management.

There are no provisions on patient ratios to be found in the agreement. These are the so-called “major staffing improvements”

the union is hailing. The real “improvement” is to the incestuous ties between the union and management which will be strengthened through yet another joint committee.

Kaiser’s real plans for staffing ratios are indicated by the regressive attendance bonus, which will take effect in the third year of the contract. Workers are eligible for this only if they take no more than one of their allotted 10 sick days during the year. The contract would not contain such language, which is designed to pressure nurses to work through illnesses, if management had any intention of fully staffing its facilities.

Just as important as the lies about staffing and raises is what has not been advertised to the membership.

The AHCU and its member unions participate in an organization called the “Labor Management Partnership” (LMP). This partnership, formed in 1997 at the initiative of the union, is based on the principle of corporatism, or the false identity of the interests of management and the workforce. Its explicit aim, according to the history page on its website, is to eliminate a “traditional approach” which could “damage the organization,” i.e., strikes.

Through the LMP, the agreement calls for the creation of a joint “Affordability and Competitiveness Task Force.” The stated goal of this task force is to “explore issues of affordability, market position, and competition affecting the future of KP in each of its markets.” Per the agreement, this task force is to work at a high level and will consider:

- ? Using the right person for the right work
- ? Innovative models of care
- ? Improved integration
- ? Expense reduction
- ? Becoming more nimble
- ? Attendance
- ? Innovation in partnership
- ? Automation and technology
- ? Engaging unions to promote KP growth
- ? Recruitment, retention and compensation

In short, the purpose of this task force is to involve the unions in slashing expenses as much as possible in the name of “competitiveness.”

To seal the deal, the agreement also funnels money into the pockets of the union officialdom. It includes payments of millions of dollars to the union bureaucracy and pumps money specifically into the task force, which will organize the cuts and attacks on the working class at Kaiser:

Effective October 1, 2021, the Employer will contribute to the Kaiser Permanente-Alliance of Health Care Unions Labor Management Partnership Trust at the rate of \$8 million annually. Each year of this Agreement, the Employee will contribute an additional amount equal to 2 percent of the parties’ total combined contributions. In addition, on April 1, 2022, Kaiser Permanente will make a one-time contribution of \$1 million for reserves/additional expense to support the work of the Affordability and Competitiveness Task Force.

In other words, while the health care workers will have to make do with cuts to real wages, the union bureaucracy will receive a *minimum* of an additional \$32 million in direct corporate funding for its assistance in carrying out these cuts.

The interests of the union are not the same as those of its workers. The career bureaucrats that manage the AHCU are wealthy and comfortable, and their privileges are based upon their collaboration with Kaiser and their ability to carry out attacks on the workforce. Ruddick himself took home \$217,987 in 2019 alone for his work in the AHCU. This is several times more than what the average Kaiser nurse makes and puts him in an entirely separate social layer.

This explains the real reason why the Kaiser unions called off Monday’s strike. A real struggle for safe staffing and decent wages cut across their bottom line no less than Kaiser itself. This confirms the warnings which the *World Socialist Web Site* made in advance of the TA that the unions, having been compelled to call a strike, would work overtime with management to arrive at a rotten deal and call it off.

After decades of continual betrayals, the days when the unions represented the interests of the working class—even in a limited sense—have long past. This is why it is necessary for nurses and health care workers to form new organizations to mobilize opposition against the pro-corporate policies of the unions and organize a real struggle, free from sabotage by the union bureaucracy, which appeals for the broadest possible unity with workers everywhere.

Voting down this contract by the widest possible margin is only the first step. The real fight begins when health care workers join with autoworkers, Amazon workers, teachers and other sections of the working class in building their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions which falsely claim to represent them.



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