

Kaiser nurses furious at unions' decision to call off strike

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Anger continues to roll in from southern California health care workers over the cancellation of a strike by 32,000 nurses at Kaiser Permanente over the weekend. Despite their powerful position and widespread support, the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Healthcare Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) announced Saturday morning they had reached an eleventh-hour deal with the health care giant to avert a strike which amounts to a four-year decline in real wages, in exchange for millions of dollars in corporate funding for the unions.

The nurses' main concerns—staffing, nurse retention and overall working conditions—have been left unchanged under the tentative agreement, but this has not stopped the UNAC/UHCP from falsely declaring “victory.”

The calling off of the Kaiser strike proved to be the beginning of a general counteroffensive by the pro-corporate union bureaucracy across the country against a growing movement by workers for strike action, rendering critical assistance to the capitalist ruling class in a period in which it is extremely vulnerable.

Yesterday the UC-American Federation of Teachers called off a strike by 6,000 lecturers throughout the nine-campus University of California higher education system just hours before it was to begin, calling the deal “historic.” Also Wednesday night, the United Auto Workers ended a strike by 10,000 John Deere workers after ramming through a contract which workers had already voted to reject two weeks before.

As of this writing, two one-day sympathy strikes in support of 700 Kaiser stationary engineers in Northern California are still scheduled for Thursday and Friday. However, the union is reportedly in negotiations with management to end the engineers' strike. If this happens, the sympathy strikes, which would involve

36,000 workers in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and thousands more in the California Nurses Association would also be called off. On Monday, the SEIU had called off the sympathy strike planned for southern California in the wake of the Kaiser deal.

“I was upset that the strike was called off,” one nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*, noting that nurses had been preparing and were excited to fight back against the understaffing and wage stagnation. “We were going to strike—30,000! It doesn't feel right that the agreement was reached. The union should have asked for more; we felt that we could have won. This was my only chance to express my true feelings about Kaiser. My voice, my power was taken away by the union.” She added that the language around staffing in the TA was vague. “There's no real solution... The union doesn't advocate for us. This is the most important part of any union. This was the time.”

In addition to the cuts in real wages, there is also concern among nurses about staffing shortages. The nurse said that in the three years she's worked for Kaiser, “Nothing has happened to make up for these shortages,” and that “Kaiser stopped hiring once the pandemic hit. If someone retired or resigned, they were not replaced right away. I'm working two jobs. One as a CNA and one as a nurse, because we don't have enough staff on the floor,” which, she said, places patients in unsafe conditions.

“Our bodies are breaking down from the burnout, they want to work you to the bone. There is no accountability, no penalty for abusing the nurses. Nothing is going to improve our conditions.”

Another traveling nurse told the WSWS, “This isn't my first time. I had the same experience at St. Francis Hospital and a similar problem with the union. We

voted to strike but the union made a deal with the hospital, even though we wanted to strike. Most staff in the hospital quit and I became a contract nurse. I became a contract nurse so I didn't have to deal with the management." She added, "I feel bad for the nurses. The union agreed with Kaiser without talking to the nurses. It's unfair to them."

The traveling nurse said that unbeknownst to them, she and many others had been hired by Kaiser as strikebreakers. They did not discover the real purpose of their contract, which was set to begin on the first day of the strike, until their orientation last week.

Another nurse, Louise, said, "There's a lot of anger. And just like what your articles say, they are pushing us out, they took the wind out of our sails to take our momentum. We were so ready to get out there. We deserve what we deserve. What the union put together is infuriating!"

Louise added that the union has been unresponsive to nurses' questions, telling them instead to be patient and wait for a ratification meeting. In the meantime, the union leadership has been responding aggressively to workers who post WSWS articles about the contract on social media, deleting posts and banning members from Facebook groups and declaring the WSWS articles, without substantiation, inaccurate rumormongering.

Louise added, "This contract is a slap in the face. I listened to every town hall leading up to this. They kept saying 4 percent, no less than 4 percent, for almost three years." Louise noted that even 4 percent is "far too little."

She continued, "In October 2020, our wage increase with our last contract was 2 percent. So, you're telling me after working through this pandemic we're not worth any more than that? And every time we get a raise, the union bureaucrats get one, too. In 2019, our union dues were 66 dollars a paycheck (every two weeks). In 2020, it went to 70.20. Multiply that by all the employees, that's millions of dollars. Where is this money? Where is our strike fund?"

In reference to the unions' claims that the contract contains major improvements to staffing ratios, Louise stated, "We already have a staffing committee. It's the same rhetoric in every single contract and it never works. They are just proposing another committee which will get nothing done and will spend the meeting talking about what to do at the next meeting."

"In the last contract I think they actually set ratios," she added, "And they were pretty good I believe. But of course, it never happened in the whole contract."

Louise also discussed the temporary nurses who were hired months ago with a start date "coincidentally" set for the same day the union set for the strike date. "There was lots of stuff online from these nurses about how they didn't know they were hired as strikebreakers. We all knew what was going on. I know people were trying to refuse to train them, but their managers said they couldn't decline."

"I'm really upset we didn't strike. We have the leverage now! What will happen in four years, what if they set our contracts to all expire at different times?" Turning to the struggle of the Kaiser engineers, Louise added, "It's sad because since we didn't strike, they won't have anyone behind them to help."

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 the form below.



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