Kaiser unions call out 40,000 workers in one-day sympathy strike with striking Northern California engineers

Evan Winters
19 November 2021

At least 40,000 Kaiser health care workers, including optometrists, clinical lab scientists, phlebotomists, diet techs and others walked out this morning for a 24-hour strike in sympathy with the two-month strike of more than 700 Kaiser stationary and biomedical engineers across northern California, members of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE).

The operating engineers are fighting against proposed raises below the rate of inflation, resulting in an effective wage cut, insufficient staffing levels and attempts to introduce contract language allowing Kaiser to more easily send engineers to work at distant facilities.

The sympathy strike was initially announced last week, in anticipation of an indefinite strike by 32,000 nurses in southern California planned for Monday. However, this was called off Saturday morning by the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Healthcare Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) following the announcement of a tentative agreement. A planned strike of southern California pharmacists the same day was also called off at the eleventh hour by the Guild for Professional Pharmacists.

Following the cancellation of these strikes, the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW), the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) canceled the portion of the sympathy strike planned for southern California, which would have included at least 10,000 additional workers.

A second 24-hour sympathy strike of the California Nurses Association is planned for today. Last week's announcement called out 22,000 Kaiser nurses across California, but the union will likely only call out its northern California workers.

The widespread turnout on the picket lines reflects enormous support for the engineers and a desire for a united struggle. At one point only a few days ago, nearly 100,000 health care workers on the west coast were prepared to take strike action this week, joining up with thousands of other striking health care workers around the country, 10,000 striking John Deere workers and others in a broader autumn offensive by the working class. But the unions have been working overtime to shut down and prevent strikes and isolating those that do occur. These same unions have been ordering their members to cross the engineers' picket line for the previous two months, and at the conclusion of the 24-hour strikes, will send them back across the picket line.

The cancellation of the southern California strike by the UNAC/UHCP came less than 12 hours after the United Auto Workers announced it was forcing Deere strikers to vote again on a contract which they already rejected. In spite of widespread anger, workers voted 61 to 39 under a campaign of threats and intimidation to accept the contract in voting yesterday, ending the strike.

On Monday afternoon, the day that the strike was set to begin, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union announced it "ratified" a contract covering 60,000 film production workers, even though a majority of voters cast ballots against it. Last month, IATSE had set a strike day only to call it off at the last second to announce its own sellout tentative agreement (TA), establishing the playbook which the UNAC/UHCP is clearly following.

Indeed, there were questions as late as Wednesday night as to whether Thursday's sympathy strike would still happen. According to statements from Kaiser, management and IUOE union officials met on Tuesday and Wednesday, and the SEIU sent out a message

© World Socialist Web Site

declaring that, in the case of yet another 11th hour TA, the sympathy strike would be called off. However, an agreement has not yet been announced.

In a statement, Kaiser brazenly highlighted its use of scab labor, stating, “During the strike, care will be provided by physicians and experienced clinical managers and staff, with the support of trained and qualified contingency staff. All our hospitals and emergency departments will continue to be open during a strike and remain safe places to receive care.”

Only stroke and severe heart attack care will be affected, with patients sent to facilities run by other health care companies.

The sympathy strike has been welcomed by the striking engineers, who have languished isolated on the picket line for over two months. Strike pay, which began as high as $1,500 per week, has fallen to only $300 per week, just above the federal minimum wage for full-time work while workers attempt to make ends meet in some of the most expensive areas of the country. Workers report being provided with little to no information about the state of contract negotiations by their union.

However, the fundamental role of the unions at Kaiser this week has been to divide workers from each other, not to unite them. The cancellation of Monday’s planned strikes of over 32,000 workers following the announcement of a tentative agreement makes a mockery of the elemental principle of “no contract, no work.” In fact, the proposed agreement would substantially cut real wages and includes no meaningful provisions to address workers’ central demand for sufficient staffing levels.

Nurses, who were blindsided by the announced deal, are furious. In conversations with the WSWS many express feeling abandoned by the UNAC and that the sudden cancellation was a transparent move to bring down their momentum. Many also said they fear the union will work to stagger contract expiration dates in the future, in a bid to prevent broader strike action.

Nurses who spoke with the WSWS were grateful to the health care workers who took part in the sympathy strike Thursday but expressed that it would have been a much stronger move if it was not limited to 24 hours. They also feel that if nurses in southern California had been on strike, it would have significantly improved the position of the engineers and maybe created the potential for workers in the sympathy strike to push to strike past 24 hours.

Nurses expressed frustration with stonewalling in response to their questions by union officials who simply tell them to wait until the ratification meeting and to “be patient” while they return to their unsafe and poorly staffed units to work without a contract again.

The fact that the sympathy strikes were called at all is an illustration of the rapid, uncontrollable growth of opposition among health care workers and among the working class in general, who are determined to win back everything that has been taken from them in decades of concessions, as well as unsafe working conditions made worse by the coronavirus pandemic.

But to win demands for decent wages and benefits, safe staffing levels and more, nurses and other health care workers must draw the necessary conclusions and build new alternative organizations. We call on Kaiser workers to form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, to campaign against the contract and carry forward their struggle.

Other rank-and-file committees have emerged as the center of opposition to union sellouts at John Deere, Volvo Trucks, auto parts manufacturer Dana and other workplaces. This provides a powerful basis for building up a network of such committees which will end the union-enforced isolation of different struggles, linking up health care workers, factory workers, teachers and others.

As COVID-19 cases begin their anticipated fall-winter surge, health care workers are bracing to weather another storm of infection and death. We call on health care workers to unite with educators and other workers to fight against the capitalist parties’ policies of mass infection and for an elimination strategy aimed at halting the transmission of this deadly virus.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site