

20,000 Northern California nurses and mental health staff conduct second 24-hour sympathy strike for Kaiser Permanente engineers

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Roughly 20,000 Northern California nurses from the California Nurses Association (CNA) and mental health staff took part in a 24-hour sympathy strike Friday in support of a two-month strike by 700 stationary and biomedical engineers. The 24-hour action came the day after Thursday's 24-hour sympathy strike of at least 40,000 optometrists, clinical lab scientists, phlebotomists, diet techs and other workers in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Picket lines were well-attended, with pickets at Kaiser facilities across the region, highlighting the enormous support among health care workers for the engineers' struggle. At noon, workers rallied at Kaiser's Oakland headquarters.

The striking stationary and biomedical engineers, members of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE), are fighting against attacks on real wages and pensions, understaffing and attempts by Kaiser to more easily force engineers to work across county lines.

Cathy Kennedy, president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers-affiliated CNA, postured as a defender of the engineers: "We also know that in order to provide the safe patient care our communities need and deserve, we must be able to count on our coworkers and they must be able to count on us. So we are standing with the Kaiser engineers in their righteous fight for a safe and just workplace." However, the CNA and SEIU have been ordering their members to cross the engineers' picket line for over two months, and sent them back across the picket lines at the conclusion of the sympathy strikes.

Tens of thousands more workers would be on strike today if not for the decision of the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Healthcare Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) and Guild for Professional Pharmacists to call off planned indefinite strikes Monday of over 32,000 workers after the announcement of a sellout tentative agreement with Kaiser. That this week's sympathy strikes

were called at all was a reflection of overwhelming support for united action across the Kaiser hospital chain, which the unions were unable to completely suppress.

Kaiser says it is continuing its practices of using scab labor to continue operations. "While staffing continues to be a challenge across health care, we have hired hundreds of nurses and other care team members in recent months and continue to support our teams and their need for respite by bringing in experienced temporary staff," the company said. Kaiser is, however, rescheduling some "non-urgent" procedures and reducing services at some specialty service locations.

Responding to concerns that facilities are falling into disrepair due to the engineers' absence, Kaiser made the following revealing statement: "We have made extensive preparations so that during this strike, engineering duties are handled by skilled and experienced engineers. Engineers, including those brought in from Kaiser Permanente facilities in other regions across the country, are supported by qualified contractors and equipment specialists, all of whom have been appropriately prepared for this work."

In other words, management, with the acquiescence of the unions, is forcing Kaiser engineers from other regions to scab on their brothers and sisters in Northern California.

Grace, an experienced nurse at Kaiser hospital in Southern California, said, "I didn't even know that [the strike by 700 engineers] was happening! It's crickets from the union."

In reference to the declining rates of strike pay for the engineers, Grace responded: "They have a strike fund? Well, where are our union dues going to? Does UNAC have financials that they share? I know the union stewards, etc., spend a lot of money on lunches! UNAC and Kaiser are working for profits, not for the safe being of their workers/members or patients."

She added: "The answer from the union was no strike pay for us [if we had gone on strike]. I didn't really think about it until I put together the union dues year after year and

[saw] the 5 percent increase in dues in 2020. Where is that money going? Another thing, why is Kaiser paying the union for staffing backfill, etc.?”

Grace was angry over the fact that the sympathy strike, originally planned in both Northern and Southern California, was then called off in Southern California after the UNAC/UHCP canceled the strike in the south. “Divisive,” she said, “It’s like we are all separate entities. Are we not all in this together? Why are we crossing picket lines? It just blows my mind what is happening and why it hasn’t sent a huge red flag about the union!”

“Why have we been crossing the picket line for two months? Why strike for the engineers for 24 hours and then cross the picket line again? Are we not part of the union alliance? Our union is preventing strikes and isolating us from those that do occur. I feel as though the union is very divisive instead of being unified.

“We have had town hall meeting after town hall meeting about the two tiers and how it is divisive and shouldn’t and wouldn’t be in this contract. That is not all that was important to members. UNAC would tell us at EVERY town hall that we would accept no less than a 4 percent wage increase each year for the next four years. Our increase should be going up not down.

“Do you think that we will ever see an increase of over 2 percent after this contract is up? Historically if you take something away it will NEVER be given back. We are not getting the information we need promptly from the union, why? You’re hiding something. Oh, that’s right, hiding a BAD contract! Why are we given such little time for the informational meetings and voting? We have weeks and months to discuss the strike vote.”

Grace attacked the litany of joint labor-management committees through which the unions are integrated with management. “Enough of the damn committees already! There are so many committees at Kaiser and NOTHING ever is accomplished. NOTHING! We had fancy language in our last contract regarding safe staffing, and our union was notified of staffing objections and still crickets!

“We are working under the worst conditions. When discussing staffing objections with managers we are always intimidated or retaliated against. Retaliation runs rampant at Kaiser. Kaiser knows that it will never be held accountable for staffing issues. UNAC does nothing to make our jobs safe. But let’s give UNAC millions of dollars of hush money ... sorry ... millions to create another committee!”

Another Kaiser nurse from Southern California expressed support for the strikes: “I think it’s a great thing to support other workers on strike. Especially the engineers. I heard they’ve been on strike for two months and doing a sympathy strike shows Kaiser solidarity.

“We the workers have to fight against the giant corporations making billions off of our blood, sweat and tears. The pandemic showed us that they don’t care about us. We are just a number.”

Megan, a Southern California nurse, said: “Everything in this agreement was to the benefit of Kaiser. I’ve never felt this way before. This is the worst contract and at the worst possible time. This was our opportunity to get something and they compromised. Well, I’ve never given you permission to compromise.”

She also discussed how she and some of the other nurses were noticing that posts on the UNAC/UHCP Facebook page that are against the contract or which shared *World Socialist Web Site* articles were being deleted.

In reference to today’s sympathy strike in support of the Northern California Kaiser engineers Megan said: “When I first heard about the sympathy strike I thought, what is 24 hours going to do? You’re just telling the employer that you’ll be back. It’s a little ridiculous. And what will the engineers think? They’ll get support for 24 hours, and then what?”

Kaiser workers must draw the necessary conclusions from the past week of betrayed and prematurely aborted strikes. There is enormous solidarity between Kaiser healthcare workers. They want to fight together. The key obstacle is the bureaucratic, pro-company unions.

The way forward for Kaiser workers to unite their struggles and oppose the unions’ betrayals to form democratically controlled rank-and-file strike committees. These committees must reach out as broadly as possible among other health care workers, educators, logistics workers and beyond. The struggle at Kaiser can only be won by expanding beyond Kaiser.

We call on all workers who want to join and support this fight to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* by filling out the form below.



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