

More revelations about the Kaiser Permanente tentative agreement

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25 November 2021

Healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente are set to vote on a concessions contract on December 8, which is backed by the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU). The union coalition announced the four-year deal on November 13, calling off a strike by 32,000 Kaiser workers in California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii who had backed a walkout in a 96 percent vote.

The unions, which include the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP), have predictably hailed the deal as a great victory. In fact, an initial analysis of the contract shows it completely ignores workers' demands, and why it should therefore be rejected by the rank-and-file.

The deal does nothing to ensure safe staffing beyond an empty pledge to form yet other "joint labor-management committees" to address the issue. In the end, the union will simply give its imprimatur to chronic understaffing. That is because its labor-management "partnership" is based on relentless cost cutting, which prohibits the reallocation of resources to hire more nurses.

The agreement provides raises that are well below the current 6.2 percent inflation rate. This will result in de facto pay cuts for workers who are already struggling to pay higher fuel, food and housing costs.

In addition, in the third year of the deal workers will be paid bonuses if they do not use more than one of the 10 sick days they are allocated. This will give workers an incentive to work if they are sick, a particularly sadistic measure during a pandemic.

For the union bureaucracy, the deal is very lucrative. Kaiser will make regular payments, totaling *at least* \$32 million, directly into the Labor Management Partnership Trust fund, a slush fund managed by the various unions at Kaiser. In exchange for this, the

unions will participate in a joint "Affordability and Competitiveness Task Force," whose purpose is to plan and implement cuts. For figures like AHCU Executive Director President Hal Ruddick, who takes in over \$200,000 a year, according to federal labor filings, this is indeed a "victory."

Initially, the tentative agreement was only accessible through the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1996 website and was spread out across 34 separate documents. Additional information about the deal has come to the surface, since the contract was consolidated into a single document, language was finalized, and more material was added.

For workers, the most salient new issues are the revisions to the "Alliance Labor Management Partnership Performance Sharing Program" (APSP). This program, jointly managed by Kaiser and the AHCU, gives payouts to employees based on their ability to meet performance goals, including "quality, affordability, service, workplace safety, and attendance." Under this contract, all AHCU represented employees will participate in APSP.

Under the APSP, the Kaiser-Alliance Labor Management Partnership (LMP) sets various affordability and performance goals, and workers will receive, in effect, a marginal raise of 3 percent if those goals are met. The effect of this arrangement is to tie compensation to cuts. In other words, if Kaiser is unable for any reason to carry out certain cost-cutting measures, the burden of that is automatically placed on its workers in the form of a pay cut.

For the unions, there is a new section added that promises additional funds to be paid directly to union-controlled accounts. On top of the flat \$32 million to be paid directly into the LMP Trust over the next four years, there will be an additional \$15 million paid to the

“Ben Hudnall Memorial Trust.” The Ben Hudnall Trust funds a training program managed by the union whose namesake was instrumental in the founding of the LMP. The first text you see on their website gives a taste for the sort of corporatism that this organization promotes and explains whom it caters to: “Built for Kaiser Permanente Managers to Supercharge Your Team’s Career Development.”

Combined with other smaller contributions sprinkled in the contract, this will bring the total payout to the union to a minimum of \$48 million over the life of the agreement. The total will likely be over \$50 million.

The agreement also includes language calling for the creation of a “racial justice” task force that reports directly to the LMP executive committee. While providing the union with a pseudo-left gloss, this will be used to bring racial politics into the workplace. Per the language in the contract, it will “[embed] Racial Justice and EID [Engagement, Inclusion and Diversity] principles into operational strategy.” There is nothing progressive about this. Identity politics have long been used to conceal the class division in society, divvy out positions based on racial and gender quotas and oppose a united struggle by white, black and immigrant workers, which threatens the wealth and power of the ruling class.

Finally, it is critical to examine what’s *not* in the contract. The struggle at Kaiser comes during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed nearly 800,000 in the US and infected about 15 percent of the population. There is virtually no mention of this catastrophe, or measures to be taken against it. The pandemic has brought the health care system to the point where nurses who witness death at rates typically seen in warzones regularly report suffering from PTSD and are driven out of the profession by impossible conditions. This occurs at precisely the moment when they are needed most.

Adequate staffing—and higher wages is an important guarantor of staffing—while one of the most important measures to ensure the health and safety of patients and health care workers, does not itself solve the pandemic. A broader social program with the goal of the complete elimination of the virus is possible, and necessary.

The stance of the unions is the stance of the Democratic Party. Some mitigational measures can be taken, but the virus is something we “must learn to live

with.” Millions will die, and that must be accepted. These politics must be rejected.

Founded last weekend, the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File committee is providing workers with a new leadership and perspective independent of and in opposition to the corporatist unions. Workers and the corporation do not have the same interests. The pandemic has exposed the catastrophic consequences of a health care system subordinated to profit. The corporations, with the assistance of the unions, want to squeeze as much work as possible from fewer and fewer workers. To oppose that, Kaiser workers need organizations that begin with what workers and the public need, not what corporate executives say they can afford.

The first action of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee was to publish their founding statement, which both calls for a NO vote on the contract, and fights to unite the working class in a common struggle to end the pandemic.

To join the committee, email Kaiserwrfc@gmail.com or text (213) 419-0737. Your name and contact information will not be shared publicly.



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