“We should all do this together. We could close Kaiser down!” Operating engineers speak out on two-month strike at Kaiser Permanente

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Some 700 operating engineers at Kaiser healthcare locations in Northern California have been on strike for over two months for better wages and higher staffing.

There is enormous support for the engineers across the Kaiser network and among workers throughout California for their struggle. This was demonstrated late last week by two one-day sympathy strikes by other Kaiser workers which involved tens of thousands of workers. These strikes effectively shut down much of the Kaiser system in the area, demonstrating the potential power of a united struggle drawing in broader layers of the working class.

However, the unions at Kaiser have worked to systematically isolate the strike. Although they were forced to call last month’s sympathy strikes because of overwhelming desire for joint strike action, before and after the one-day protests, the same unions have been sending their members across the engineers’ picket lines.

The strike has also been isolated by the cancellation by the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals unions of a strike by 32,000 nurses and health care workers in southern California, only days before it was scheduled to begin. The unions are now attempting to ram through a tentative agreement with massive concessions, against widespread opposition from Kaiser nurses.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke to several striking engineers about their conditions, the strike and the unions, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

David, a northern California Kaiser engineer, spoke to WSWS reporters after reading the founding statement from the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee published on the WSWS.

David said it has been difficult during the pandemic to acquire necessary PPE, and that it took months before Kaiser engineers received the equipment they needed. “We have to go into [rooms with COVID patients] a lot. If the bed is broken they don’t bring the bed out into the hall or anything, we have to go into the room to fix it to replace a cord or something else. Six months into the pandemic, we were just given surgical masks and gloves and a gown, even though we needed N95s or even something better like a PAPR respirator. My wife and I were watching the news and we would see other workers wearing hazmat suits going into COVID rooms while we were going in with surgical masks. Soon we saw that even Kaiser nurses had better protection.”

David said he and his coworkers went to the director to demand better PPE. “They told us not to worry and it took forever to get the right equipment. Now we have N95’s and a PAPR [powered air-purifying respirator] which we have to share.”

When asked what he thinks about the cancellation of the strike by Kaiser nurses, he said, “We should all be striking. We should all do this together. We could close Kaiser down!

“We’ve been out here for two and a half months. I’ve been literally sleeping out [on the picket line] because I’m on the graveyard shift. Guys are going to start losing their homes. Some of us are single parents. And our union isn’t telling us a whole lot. I’m for the union, but they aren’t communicating. We’ve been out

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here and no one is doing anything."

Workers were met with a "nasty letter" after engineers started asking more questions of their union representation, David said. "It said something like, 'you chose to have us represent you so you just need to stand by' ... We aren't getting any help from the union arranging media. I have had to call different news agencies to get them down here. I don't know why the union doesn't do it. Maybe they don't want to upset Kaiser."

Lawrence, a striking northern California Kaiser operating engineer whose name has been changed to protect his identity, shared what he has learned about the company's use of strikebreakers. "In San Jose, they've got a scab boiler company coming in."

"In southern California, the chief engineers are non-union. They're Kaiser managers. They can force their chief engineers from southern California up here to work. But there aren't 700 of them."

"They have pipefitters from Louisiana sitting in the boiler plant. They don't even know what the equipment is. It's not even that the replacement workers don't know how to work on the equipment, they don't even know what the machine is and does.

"We had some issues with the pipe trades. Some unions are crossing our picket lines. That said ... We haven't had one single engineer cross our picket line."

"The fact that Kaiser is willing to bring scabs in and bring people in that are not familiar with this stuff and expect the jobs to get done is risking the lives of their patients. It's beyond bad news, unbelievable. If somebody would have told me 6 months ago that this would happen, I would have said you were nuts. About 6 months, expect the lawsuits to start coming in.

"They're not keeping records for all this equipment that needs to be calibrated every month. They're not conducting necessary tests for emergency preparedness. They're being completely neglected. Kaiser's sending all these messages saying everything is being taken care of."

Lawrence countered Kaiser's narrative that its engineers are overpaid. "They want us to take $7 less than the going rate. Then they publish our salaries including all the benefits that they pay to themselves. If your health coverage costs $30,000 a year, they pay that to themselves. We are the most highly paid operating engineers but we already live in the most expensive place to work. Most of us drive more than 100 miles a day. A town home around here costs $1.1 million. Most of them spend 4 or 5 hours a day on the road.

"The younger guys, there's no prayer for a new hire or anybody who's come into the trades in the last ten years, there's not even a prayer of them to be able to buy a house or even a condo around here."

Denouncing the overwork of nurses during the pandemic, Lawrence explained, "The nurses are quitting in droves. By the time the nurses are basically broken in. It usually takes about five years to get up to speed on what they do. By that time, they're quitting. It's very much like working as a nurse in a MASH unit in a war zone, because the patients die. The percentage of people who are dying are phenomenal. They had to bring refrigerated trailers in to fit the dead bodies."

Lawrence made an appeal for a united Kaiser-wide struggle. "We're on our own here, like David and Goliath. We need like 50,000 people to come out here with us. We haven't stopped their operation except during the sympathy strikes. That shut Kaiser down basically for two days."

"I heard from your coverage in southern California, that the rank-and-file is not happy with the [UNAC/UHCP] tentative agreement. I do know that the northern California pharmacists have a tentative agreement and their membership are very unhappy with the tentative agreement and that's also going to be ratified or turned down on the 3rd of December."

"We're hoping that the rank-and-file in those two groups turns Kaiser's offer down and Kaiser comes back and gives them what they need.

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

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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