

At online town hall, Kaiser union officials praise “joint” approach to cost-cutting in tentative agreement

Norisa Diaz
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Join the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee and fight for safe staffing and adequate resources to fight COVID-19! Contact the committee by email at Kaiserwrfc@gmail.com or by text (213) 419-0737. Your name and contact information will not be shared publicly.

On Wednesday, the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) held an online town hall meeting in which top officials tried to sell a concessions agreement which nurses and health care workers are scheduled to vote on December 7 and 8. The meeting was a dull, lifeless affair in which union officials sought to cover up the actual details of the contract and their own conduct in calling off a strike by 32,000 nurses in Southern California.

When the present tentative agreement was announced only days before the November 15 strike deadline, the unions declared that the mere threat of a strike had been sufficient to produce a massive victory including major gains to wages and staffing. The opposite is the case. Under the TA, wage increases would be set at between 2 and 3 percent a year, less than half the current rate of inflation, and the unions would commit to helping management find ways to cut costs.

The deal also contains no commitments from management to address dangerously low staffing levels. Instead, it would create another layer of labor-management committees to “discuss” the issue. It also creates a bonus incentive, starting in the third year of the contract, to encourage nurses to avoid calling in sick. In exchange for these and other concessions, management will funnel tens of millions of dollars into the pockets of the bureaucracy through the infamous Labor Management Partnership and other joint schemes.

Meanwhile, opposition continues to grow against the contract. Shortly after the deal was announced, nurses and other health care workers across the West Coast founded the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee and issued a statement calling for the contract’s defeat. The statement also connected the fight for safe staffing and adequate resources at Kaiser to the broader fight to eliminate the coronavirus pandemic.

This was the first meeting which the unions have held on the

contract since the deal was announced more than two weeks ago. No rank-and-file workers were allowed to speak or ask questions, with the union citing the high volume of callers. This was a clear indication of their nervousness over the deep-seated opposition to the deal. The unions have also been systematically banning critical comments from union-affiliated Facebook pages and deleting posts linking to articles from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The opening remarks by UNAC/UHCP Executive Director Joseph Guzynski and President Denise Duncan, RN, included a patronizing music video of nurses at a rally, while the two celebrated the tentative agreement as a major victory.

But the socio-economic gulf between these well-heeled bureaucrats and rank-and-file nurses is shown by the fact that Guzynski made \$243,499 last year, according to DOL filings, while Duncan made \$263,194. Guzynski brushed aside workers’ anger by condescendingly declaring that members are having “difficulty understanding the bargaining process.”

Key to their arguments that the TA is a “victory” was the claim, repeatedly endlessly during the meeting, that it does not contain the two-tier wage structure which nurses reportedly demanded. However, it is widely suspected by nurses that this demand was only a negotiating ploy to ease the passage of the concessions contained in the current TA.

The union also threatened that if the contract is voted down, negotiations would “start from scratch” and the next TA might include the two-tier structure. Indeed, the union did not even exclude the possibility that future contracts would not contain a tier system, even with the TA’s passage. “I don’t know if it [the two tier] will come back, we’ll see,” Guzynski said.

Indeed, the union admitted in its presentation that the deal included cost-cutting measures through Kaiser’s Performance Sharing Program (PSP), which replaces many of the economic functions of a two-tier wage system. The deal commits the union to helping the company find cost savings equal to 1.5 percent of wage costs each year.

Under the new PSP formula, this “affordability” target will account for a whopping 67 percent of workers’ performance bonuses, up from 20 percent. This means that if these targets

are missed, workers would be retaliated against financially through sharp reductions in their bonus payouts. They presented this as an alternative to the “unilateral approach to address wage costs.” In other words, the union is fully prepared to accept sharp cost cutting, as long as it is done with their collaboration and support.

Despite numerous and empty references to “well being,” “total health” and “psychological safety and mental health” by UNAC Executive Vice President Charmaine Morales, officials were compelled to acknowledge the fact that concrete staffing levels for nurses have not been addressed in the TA. UNAC Treasurer Peter Sidhu absurdly attempted to justify this by arguing that this was in the interests of the membership as a whole, claiming that it would have been unfair to non-nurses to stipulate such ratios in advance. There were “high level conversations around staffing but it was never just about staffing,” he said. “I wasn’t just bargaining for nurses. I need to ‘take my nurse hat off’ and bargain for all.”

Perhaps the most revealing element of the town hall were frequent statements which implicitly admitted that the unions had never intended for the strike to actually take place, even though members had voted to strike by 96 percent. Duncan repeatedly used the phrase “playing a strike,” while Guzynski continually had to catch himself throughout the meeting saying they had “Ensured we had an incredible strike ... threat.” One unintentionally damning slide contained a photo of hundreds of picket signs assembled at the union hall but never actually used.

But nurses voted overwhelmingly to strike, not to *threaten to strike*. Kaiser reacted furiously to the union’s decision to call off strike in the eleventh hour. One nurse told the WWS, “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!”

Throughout the meeting, officials pushed the corporatist notion of the identity of interests between management and the workers. “We have shown the past nine months that we can push through the pandemic together,” Duncan said. In fact, even as Kaiser and other hospital chains are raking in billions of dollars, exhausted and traumatized nurses are leaving the profession in droves, with polls showing that some 40 percent currently working wish to leave the profession entirely.

Nationwide, the Biden administration and politicians from both parties have opted for a policy of allowing mass death from coronavirus, rejected out of hand lockdowns, mask mandates and other essential public health measures even amid a new surge and as the hyper-infectious Omicron variant has reached US shores. This is done in the name that such measures are “too costly” to the economy—that is, to the record surge in the stock market fueled by a speculative binge.

Duncan also stressed the closeness and political affiliations with California Governor Gavin Newsom and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), noting “they helped guide them past the finish

line.” This amounts to an admission that the TA was a product of a broader conspiracy involving the Democratic Party and top national union officials to prevent the outbreak of a strike.

Indeed, such a coordinated campaign has played a central role in shutting down or preventing strikes over the past two months. Sixty thousand film production members in the IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) union also had their strike canceled at the last second, and the union “ratified” an agreement which the majority voted down. Late last month, 10,000 striking John Deere workers were sent back to work by the United Auto Workers, who forced them to vote again on a contract which the workers had already rejected. Shortly afterwards, Biden attended a photo-op in Detroit with the UAW president, of whom he claimed, “No one does more to look out for American autoworkers.”

Significantly, a slide titled “How Solidarity Fueled Our Victory” contains headlines from various liberal and pseudo-left press outlets, including *Mother Jones* and *Jacobin*, the latter is associated with the Democratic Socialists of America. For the union bureaucracy, “solidarity” means support from the capitalist political establishment, not appealing for unity with other workers engaged in a struggle. Indeed, the cancellation of the strike had the effective of isolating the more than two-month-long strike by Kaiser engineers in Northern California, where the unions are instructing their members to cross the picket line.

The entire experience with the contract proves that nurses are not “pushing through the pandemic” together with management or the unions but in direct conflict with them in their fight for the adequate provision of resources for public health. To carry this fight forward, nurses must organize themselves independently of the pro-corporate trade unions.



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