

Opposition remains high to sellout contract as voting begins for 52,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers

Norisa Diaz
8 December 2021

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.

Join the Kaiser Rank and File Facebook group here.

Voting began Tuesday for 52,000 health care workers on a contract proposal from the Alliance of Health Care Unions at Kaiser Permanente. The voting, which is being conducted online, will continue until midnight on Wednesday night.

The contract was announced as the unions canceled a strike by 32,000 nurses and other health care workers in Southern California last month, the weekend before it was due to begin on November 15. The deal, which the unions have falsely claimed contains massive gains, in fact contains wage increases far below the rate of inflation, commitments from the unions to further cut costs by 1.5 percent each year and no hard commitments on staffing ratios. In return, management will funnel tens of millions of dollars into the pockets of the unions through the Labor Management Partnership and other joint schemes. The contract was also lengthened from the usual three years to four years.

Workers had voted to authorize strike action by 96 percent, in balloting which took place over the course of ten days, in contrast to the far more rapid two-day voting process for the contract.

In response to this betrayal, nurses and other health care workers founded the independent Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee and issued a statement, "Vote no on the UNAC/UHCP sellout! Join the Kaiser Workers rank-and-file committee!" The committee also called on health care workers to connect the struggle at Kaiser with the broader to fight for a change in public health policies necessary to bring an end to the pandemic and end the subordination of human lives to profit.

The union has been working overtime to sell the deal to its membership. At a town hall by the United Nurses

Associations of California last week, no rank-and-file workers were allowed to speak. In their presentation, union officials hailed the "joint" commitment to cost-cutting in the current TA as an alternative to the "unilateral" approach allegedly favored by management, which fulfilled many of the same economic functions of management's demand for a two-tier wage system.

The unions are also ramping up censorship of the *World Socialist Web Site* on its affiliated Facebook pages. Several more writers for the WSWWS report are being blocked from one major Facebook group, including Evan Winters and Alfred Kurosawa, both of whom have conducted interviews with rank-and-file nurses on the contract.

Nevertheless, a survey of social media posts suggests that opposition remains high going into the voting. It appears that many more posts are being made urging coworkers to reject the contract than posts in favor of the deal.

One nurse, who said she would vote "no," told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We need to put ourselves and the [nursing profession], a career we are proud of, first... We often have no [certified nursing assistants] and no charge nurses on our unit. It is commonplace now for more than half our staff on duty at any given time to be traveling nurses (i.e., nurses on short-term contracts). We have had staff leave our unit and no one hired as permanent staff to take those positions. They want to hand us 3 and 2 percent wage increases, when just this year we have had inflation over 6 percent.

"We and our patients deserve better. We deserve to keep our pension and not have to fear losing the benefits that brought us to Kaiser."

Another nurse told the WSWWS said she was appalled by the scare tactics employed by the union. She said the union was "congratulating themselves, saying 'this is the best we've got. If you vote no, if we go back, we could lose it'. They are using this to threaten nurses into voting for the contract.

“We could have gotten what we wanted and maybe more; 30,000 nurses were ready to strike. The union tried to claim that, based on signups, many nurses did not want to strike for an open period of time. It’s a scare tactic that they’re trying to use against us. They ‘hyped’ nurses up with talk of a strike. They kept saying how they ‘fought against the two-tier system and won.’ They talked about the language of the contract. How is it going to affect us? It’s just another committee, committee, committee. It won’t change anything.”

She encouraged her coworkers to reject the deal “because the agreement doesn’t have any real solutions to the staffing shortage we have and doesn’t hold the Kaiser accountable if they choose to keep us short-staffed. This has been happening for the last three years, and it hasn’t gotten better, it has only gotten worse. I have a license and I have to protect my license. But it doesn’t make me feel safe to put my license on the line for their profits and it’s not safe for the patients who have substandard care. I’m not going to vote for a 2 and 3 percent raise that doesn’t compete with inflation. Taking a lump sum bonus isn’t worth it. We should get the wage we deserve.”

Gail Price, a retired billing worker from the University of California Davis Medical (UC Medical) in Sacramento, encouraged her colleagues at Kaiser: “[You’ve] just got to keep fighting. Don’t take a bad contract. As long as management’s involved, you shouldn’t be voting on a contract. They’re paying them \$8 million, and I didn’t understand that. They didn’t seem to be concerned about the staffing level. It doesn’t sound like the union is working for the workers. If it was, they wouldn’t be taking cutbacks.”

Gail agreed with the decision to form the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee in opposition to the union. “That makes sense to me because obviously you can’t trust the union at this point. The rank and file need to find a way to get the information to the workers and to re-bargain the contract. Something that the workers want, and not what the union wants with management.”

Comparing conditions at Kaiser with UC Medical, Gail explained, “It’s pretty similar. It’s like there’s no union. You may have a good contract, but people are getting illegally fired. They’re going against the contract on a daily basis. Workers are getting write-ups and suspended for things that are covered by the contract and there’s nobody in there from the union to help anybody. UC is in bed with the upper management of the union I’m sure, so UC can do what they want right now.”

The cancellation of the strike in Southern California last month effectively isolated a more than two-month-long strike by 700 Kaiser stationary engineers in Northern California. With the exception of two 24-hour strikes, the

other Kaiser unions have been instructing their members at the facilities being struck to cross the picket line. However, engineers report that they have been following the opposition to the AHCU deal with great interest and urged workers to reject the contract.

“I think they should vote No,” one engineer, who is also a member of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee, said. “I think that when most people understand what they are agreeing to, they won’t be happy with what they get, with the raises and cash bonuses, the payments to the Kaiser Labor Management Partnership, the lack of specific wording regarding staffing levels, and the length of the contract.”

“If this contract is accepted, this will place an enormous amount of pressure on [stationary engineers] to accept the current demands that Kaiser has put in front of them. They will be more likely to be forced to accept a substandard contract. This sets a precedent for all other health care unions and for the engineers, all other contracts. This puts downward pressure on the amount that they’re willing to pay employees; the amount paid to retirements, benefits in general, will also risk being taken away.

“This contract does nothing to address the spread of COVID-19 and will more than likely address the status quo, contributing to a lack of staffing for nurses, pharmacy assistants, EMTs, all other health care workers, as well as a lack of medical tools like correct PPE required to do their job safely and effectively.

“It seems very apparent that the union is not following the majority of what the workers want, and therefore, a democratic rank-and-file committee is the best answer to truly represent what the workers of the union want and are willing to fight for.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact