

Contract passes at Kaiser Permanente over significant opposition from health care workers

Our reporters
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The four-year national agreement between hospital giant Kaiser Permanente and the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) has passed, according to announcements made by the unions Wednesday night and Thursday morning. The United Nurses Association of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP), the largest component union of the alliance with over 30,000 members, announced the passage of their agreement Thursday morning following two days of online voting.

As of this writing, UNAC/UHCP has not posted any information about vote totals on their websites on social media accounts, and nurses in touch with WSWs reporters have stated that they have also not received any further information about the vote. Under these conditions, there is every reason to treat claims by the unions of overwhelming support for the deal with skepticism. Multiple workers commented on Facebook that they were unable to vote after receiving an error message reading, “Ballot spoiled by administrator.” It is unclear if these errors were resolved or if some votes were not counted.

Regardless of the vote totals, it is clear that the union forced the contract through against significant opposition, and it resorted to widespread censorship of its social media pages and other forms of intimidation in a bid to suppress and isolate this opposition. While the unions have continuously claimed the contract is a major victory, the opposite is the case. The deal is a concessions contract, which will last a year longer than previous three-year contracts, containing wage increases far below the rate of inflation and no commitments on staffing ratios.

The contract also commits the Alliance unions to help

management find significant cost savings each year of the agreement, the success of which will be tied to workers’ performance bonuses. It also contains a new bonus scheme to pressure workers into avoiding taking their contractually allotted sick days. In exchange for these concessions, the unions will receive upwards of \$50 million throughout the life of the agreement in corporate funding through the Labor Management Partnership and other joint schemes.

The contract is a naked betrayal of Kaiser workers, who had voted by 96 percent in Southern California to authorize strike action, only to have their strike canceled at the last minute last month. They are determined to fight for real gains, including the necessary resources to guarantee safe staffing ratios under conditions where hospitals throughout the country face the prospect of once again being inundated by a new surge in the coronavirus made worse by the Omicron variant. Kaiser, despite its “non-profit” status, made \$5 billion last year.

Over the course of the contract struggle, health care workers made a significant step forward in mobilizing themselves independently of the union apparatus by forming the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which campaigned against the deal and issued a statement, “Vote no on the UNAC/UHCP sellout! Join the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee!”

Opposition remained high throughout the vote. One worker commented on Facebook Wednesday, “NOT GOOD ENOUGH! Inflation is 6.2% this year. The four-year deal is garbage!”

On Reddit, one Kaiser nurse wrote, “The worst part is most of us didn’t even know about [the] strike [by Kaiser engineers in Northern California] until ours was

a possibility.” Another said, “The engineers have been on strike for nearly 2 months. It’s practically a hunger strike at this point. All they are asking for are raises that match inflation/cost of living, which is something like \$3/hr more on average.” A third nurse added, “They’ve been out on the corners of our local facilities 24/7 for the last 52 days. It’s a frigging tragedy. They literally keep the lights on!”

A Kaiser engineer spoke to the WSWS in support of the UNAC/UHCP rank-and-file members. He stated, “I have been working almost 10 years, and I don’t like it any more. After 80 days on strike, this is not fair. We were heroes in the pandemic, and all the sudden we became zeroes. I really do not think it [Kaiser] is the best place to work any more. I’m going to strike and support everything. I’m almost retirement age, but for future generations will have to fight, otherwise it’s not right.”

Other workers denounced the censorship on the UNAC/UHCP Facebook pages. In response to the calling off of the strike in mid-November, one nurse tweeted, “This is not a win. Why do you think we deserve less of a raise after making sacrifices through the pandemic? And why won’t you approve posts on your FB page?”

Another Kaiser nurse told WSWS reporters, “I don’t trust the union. They are getting \$8 million [a year] and another \$15 million for the Ben Hudnall Memorial Trust. They settled for no second-tier wages and then gave us scraps. Why does KP give the union money instead of increasing our wages with that? And if they’re getting all that money, why do we need to pay high union dues? They said we would strike if KP offered less than 4 percent increases but ended up settling [on between 2 and 3 percent] once they were sure it wouldn’t affect them.”

Responding directly to a Facebook post declaring “victory,” another nurse wrote, “We should still be striking. ... I feel like we should have asked for [a] 6-8% increase since we are dissecting downward (after all KP was initially offering to decrease our pay by 10%). [This is the] same when negotiating anything else, you start high then go down low, not start low and go down lower, no?”

“Like UNAC/UHCP has been saying from the beginning when rallying all KP employees to vote for the authorization to strike, ‘it’s harder to get something

back once it’s been taken away’... I’m not sure how this is [a] better/fair contract. It addresses nothing for economic inflation post COVID-19 pandemic with cost of living being increased by 6-12%. And it looks like we will be fighting another wage raise decrease attempt in 2024.”

Another worker responded to the same UNAC/UHCP post: “Are we going to work on staffing and establishing core numbers and enforcement of that? Do we have a way of enforcing safe staffing with CNAs? So tired of working short [staffed] and hearing no such thing as core staffing; also we want 4% for four years nothing less ... Kaiser/UNAC doesn’t recognize us as the professionals we are and pay us the value we are worth. DO NOT SETTLE for less...”

The fight at Kaiser is far from over. In spite of a wave of betrayals and sellouts by the unions across the country, including not only Kaiser but IATSE, John Deere, Kellogg’s and others, the working class is continuing to move against poverty wages and the subordination of their lives to profit. The fact that a series of walkouts have taken place in the Detroit public schools against the spread of COVID-19 and the danger of school shootings, organized separately from the teachers unions, testifies to the fact that this movement is continuing to grow, tempered by the harsh experiences workers are making with the unions.

The ongoing surge in the pandemic makes it essential that nurses and other health care workers appeal to support from the working class as a whole for their fight for adequate resources for public health. The activity of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee will continue to expand, in order to build this support and provide health care workers with the means to oppose the betrayals of their unions.



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