

Health care workers skeptical about margin of contract ratification at Kaiser Permanente

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Skepticism is brewing among health care workers over the margin of victory claimed by the unions of a new contract covering over 50,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente. The four-year deal, which contains wage increases below inflation and commits the unions to helping management further cut costs, was declared ratified Thursday morning following two days of online voting.

The voting procedure was deliberately opaque, and workers who spoke with the WSWS were unclear how the voting would be tabulated on the national level. However, a subsequent statement by the Alliance of Health Care Unions, the umbrella organization which includes most of the unions at Kaiser and which negotiated the agreement, stated that, while the agreement had been struck at the level of the Alliance, actual ratification would take place individually at each union.

This means that, if the result was split across different unions, with some voting to ratify and others to reject, those unions which voted to accept the agreement would go to work under the new contract, isolating the unions who voted the deal down. This transparently undemocratic method is designed to divide and conquer opposition among the rank-and-file and to punish workers who voted against the deal and launched a strike with the prospect of being left to themselves on the picket line.

This in fact is what actually may occur with the 1,600 members of the United Pharmacists of Southern California (UPSC), the sole union to have voted down the local and national agreements.

The margin of victory for the contract at other unions, in spite of significant vocal opposition to the deal in advance of the vote, raised eyebrows among many Kaiser workers. According to a union Facebook post, 70 percent of workers in the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP), which accounts for more than 60 percent of the total AHCU membership, voted to approve the contract. Five of UNAC/UHCP's affiliated unions, it claimed, approved the contract by over 90 percent. Incredibly, it also claimed that the membership of United Pharmacists Hawaii, which has several hundred members, approved the deal unanimously. Vote totals were not made public.

UNAC/UHCP's executive vice president Charmaine Morales announced, "This is a historic moment for our union, for all Kaiser employees, and for health care workers across the country." She added that "We showed what's possible when you come together to stand for the highest professional standards and the highest quality patient care." In fact, the contract does nothing to guarantee safe staffing, but creates another staffing committee, all while funneling tens of thousands of dollars to the Alliance's Labor Management Partnership. The same day that the contract ratification was announced and workers reeled in disbelief, Morales posted on social media her getaway to her cabin in the snow.

One nurse told the WSWS, 'The UNAC Vice President just posted that she's having a lovely time right now in her beautiful cabin in Big Bear... Ridiculous. I would not be posting anything AT ALL if I was a Union leader.'

Many workers expressed shock at the news that the agreement passed, citing that they knew very few coworkers who supported the deal. The WSWS was shown a recent poll on the San Diego UNAC Facebook page which revealed the vote going in an entirely different direction, with 204 workers voting against it out of 229

and only 25 voting for it.

A Southern California nurse in surgery told the WSWS that at his hospital the vast majority declared they would be voting NO: “95 percent of us were against it. The consensus was that it was not a good deal. There are a lot of questions. We all feel like they were not transparent in their numbers.”

He also noted that he and coworkers were suspicious that the announcement from UNAC/UHCP arrived at 12:17 a.m. Thursday morning, just 17 minutes after polls officially closed, noting that it appeared the announcement was prepared in advance of the tally: “They already had their flier typed up and email ready to go out.”

In reference to the contract he noted, “Already [the unions’ initial demand of 4 percent wage increases at the start of talks], that seemed crazy low, especially considering inflation. Deere got over 10 percent. Now it’s the whole life [of the contract], 10 percent, over four years. We’ve always had a three-year contract, and now we can’t strike in unison. Everyone understands that’s why they did this. A lot of the techs are worried, their contract is up this year or next. They are worried about getting screwed over, saying if this was allowed to happen to us, they will get something even worse.

“A lot of us were deployed to other departments during the pandemic. We had to do things we aren’t comfortable with. The union said ‘that’s the way it is, deal with it.’ After the last two years we should have had more leverage than ever to ask for more.”

Whatever the case may be with the outcome of the vote, the process itself made a mockery of democracy. The unions announced the deal, which failed to meet both nurses’ demands and even the far more modest public targets of the unions themselves, when they canceled a strike by 32,000 workers in southern California which had been authorized by a 96 percent margin. Throughout the entire run-up to the vote, the unions went on a censorship rampage on social media, scrubbing opposition posts from their pages and banning oppositional nurses.

From the beginning, their aim was not to convince nurses and health care workers to support the contract but to convince them that nothing could be done to stop it. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that even if the vote had gone 70 percent against the deal rather than in favor, that the union would have yielded to popular pressure. In one struggle after another, from John Deere to Ingalls shipyard workers to IATSE film crew members, the unions have defied “no” votes, either by “ratifying” the

contracts anyway through an anti-democratic clause in their constitutions or by forcing workers to vote again and again on the same deal.

The call-off of the November 15 strike also ensured the further isolation of the 700 Kaiser engineers represented by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) who have been starved on the picket line for over two months with declining rates of strike pay by IUOE as the winter holidays approach. The 24-hour sympathy strikes called by CNA and SEIU leadership proved nothing more than a stunt as union officials, before and since, have instructed workers to cross the picket lines.

Kaiser workers, however, cannot wait another four years to organize the next fight. Already, the surge in coronavirus cases, which will almost certainly be made significantly worse by the hyper-infectious Omicron variant, threatens to overwhelm US hospitals once again, making the nurses’ struggle for safe staffing ratios and adequate resources for public health a life-and-death question not just for themselves and their patients but for the entire working class, who are being sent into unsafe workplaces to work and risk infection and death in the name of corporate profit.

A new independent leadership is emerging among Kaiser workers themselves, in the form of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The formation of the committee in the course of this struggle was a significant step forward in mobilizing opposition to the betrayals of the unions and to appeal for the broadest support within the working class for Kaiser health care workers.



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