

Kaiser workers: To prepare for our fight for safe staffing during Omicron, we must learn the lessons of the AHCU contract betrayal!

The Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee
15 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.

You can also join the Facebook group sponsored by the committee, the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Forum, [here](#).

The Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee denounces the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) for its conduct in last week's vote covering more than 50,000 Kaiser workers across the West Coast. The entire process was designed to keep us confused, divided and in the dark to ensure passage of a contract that does not meet our most basic demands. This will leave hospitals woefully unprepared as the entirely predictable winter surge intersects with the highly infectious Omicron variant.

For the past two years, we have risked our lives, attempting to keep the health care system running amid an unsustainable level of COVID-19 cases, facing chronic understaffing, unsafe patient ratios, and inadequate protective equipment. This has taken an enormous toll on ourselves and the public. Each death takes a toll not only on the families of the deceased, but on the healthcare workers fighting to save them. Many healthcare workers simply could not continue under these circumstances and have left the profession.

Now, the Omicron variant is now rapidly spreading within the United States and worldwide. While more research is needed, it is clear that this variant is far more transmissible than any seen previously and there is strong evidence that it can at least partially evade vaccine-induced immunity. Hospitals are already overflowing in Gauteng Province, South Africa, with young children among the most affected. But the Democrats' and Republicans' plan is to do essentially nothing even as hospitals are already overwhelmed in much of the country.

We refuse to accept this entirely preventable outcome. The unions may have forced through the contract, but we cannot and will not wait another four years for it to expire to renew our struggle for adequate resources for public health. We demand safe staffing ratios *now* because countless lives are at stake.

The Omicron variant and winter surge are intersecting with a growing movement by workers everywhere against the subordination of human life to profit and share values. On

December 15, health care workers in Turkey launched a one day nationwide strike to demand increased wages and working conditions amid the uncontrolled spread of coronavirus there.

In Detroit, teachers and students have conducted sickouts and protests, independently of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, as new infections continue at record levels there. And Kellogg's workers, in the face of mass firing threats from management and similar anti-democratic tactics by their union which were employed against us, rejected a sellout contract in favor of continuing their two month strike.

This shows that the militancy of the working class is growing, not subsiding. This provides favorable conditions for us to continue our fight because it is the workers who can and must fight for a change in policy to end the pandemic.

But to prepare for the struggle on the horizon, we must first learn the lessons of the struggle we have passed through. Here is a review of the events of the past two months:

In October, over 30,000 of us in Southern California voted by 96 percent for strike action. For more than a month, we were ordered to stay on the job and, in northern California, to continue crossing the picket line of striking stationary and biomedical engineers under the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE).

When a strike was finally announced for November 15, we were prepared and eager to fight. However, the unions called off the planned strikes with less than 24 hours' notice, announcing rotten tentative agreements. Striking engineers were provided only with token 24-hour stunt strikes by the California Nurses Association (CNA) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

In the lead-up to the vote, the union aggressively censored opposition to the contract on its social media pages, and we were fed useless platitudes in online town hall meetings. While we were given 10 days to vote to authorize strike action, we had only two days to vote on the contract.

The structure of the vote was designed to penalize workers who voted the contract down. Instead of voting on the AHCU contract as a whole, each union within the alliance voted individually on whether to ratify the contract. This divide-and-conquer approach means that workers who vote down the contract are left isolated and forced to strike alone.

This is precisely what has happened to the United Pharmacists of Southern California, the only member of the AHCU to report a No

vote on the contract. If workers play by the AHCU rulebook, these 1,600 pharmacists will strike without the support of tens of thousands of fellow workers.

By making us vote in this fashion, the AHCU demonstrates that it is, in reality, an “alliance” of the union bureaucracy and management against us health care workers. The only sense in which these corrupt organizations are united is through their participation in corporatist institutions such as the Labor Management Partnership through which they take tens millions of dollars in corporate money in exchange for concessions.

This contract was not the product of negotiations between good-faith representatives of workers and management, but a deal between two arms of management imposed on us through deceit, intrigue, and censorship. Thus, even if the union-reported margins of victory are correct, and we have no good reason to believe their integrity given that they are implausibly high (the union claims, for example, that 100 percent of Hawaii pharmacists voted in favor), this contract has no validity whatsoever.

We demand that the AHCU release full vote totals, not just percentages, for every union. We also demand that they explain why and how many workers received automated messages that their ballots had been “spoiled by the administrator,” how many ballots fell into this category, and what, if anything was done to ensure these workers had a say on the contract.

This entire experience with the contract has proven to us that our interests are in direct conflict with management and the unions. A real struggle for safe working conditions, living wages and an adequate provision of resources for public health must be carried out in opposition to both management and the pro-corporate trade unions, which are two sides of the same coin.

This is why we formed the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to mobilize our coworkers for just such a fight. The work of this committee must and will continue and expand in the coming weeks and months.

With Omicron looming, it is as urgent as ever that we continue to fight for the original demands originally proposed by the Committee:

- Adequate staffing levels must be set and enforced by nurses and health care workers themselves. The contract must have concrete and safe staffing ratios. In addition, there must be actual consequences set when safe staffing is not met during any given shift.

- Annual 10 percent wage increases, together with cost-of-living increases to protect against inflation.

- The elimination of all wage and benefit tiers, with all workers brought to the top tier.

- The enforcement of contractually mandated breaks.
 - The immediate disbandment of the Labor Management Partnership and the requisition of its funds for the purpose of distributing strike pay to every striking worker.

In addition, we demand the following:

- An end to the isolation of the northern California stationary and biomedical engineers’ strike. Kaiser workers should not be ordered to cross their picket line or the picket line of southern California pharmacists should they go on strike. We call on Kaiser workers to join our committee to discuss preparations for a true

sympathy strike.

- High-quality personal protective equipment for all workers, including N95 masks or better, e.g. elastomeric respirators.

- Enforcement of basic safety procedures. Workers must not transition from COVID-19 units to other units without the necessary safety procedures. Workers must not be asked to perform tasks outside their expertise without proper training and support.

But our fight at Kaiser is inseparable from the fight against the pandemic as a whole. The best way to ensure a functioning health care system is to prevent mass infection from overwhelming us in the first place. We call on our fellow workers to join us in the fight for an elimination strategy.

This requires the temporary closure of all non-essential workplaces and a switch to remote learning in schools until the virus can be brought under control, with full compensation for workers and small business owners, using funds taken from major corporations and the ultra-wealthy who have vastly enriched themselves during the pandemic. This must be done in combination with a program of mass testing and quarantining of exposed individuals, vaccinations, mask mandates and improvements to ventilation in public spaces, with the aim of driving cases down to zero.

The experience in China, a country of 1.4 billion which has experienced only *two deaths* this year compared to nearly 450,000 in the US, shows that such measures can be done and allow people to return to relative normalcy without constant fear of infection and death. But if the pandemic is to be ended, this is must be carried out on an international scale. This is why we must fight to establish connections with health care workers and other workers across the world to end this pandemic.

To pursue an elimination strategy, we must draw a balance sheet of the past two years. We must have a clear understanding of the roots of the horrors of the pandemic, including guidance from the most serious and principled scientists and public health experts as well as first-hand accounts from workers of what the pandemic was like for them and how to improve their conditions. For this reason, we endorse the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic and call on workers, scientists, and public health experts to provide testimony. Participation in the Inquest will form a critical element of our work in the coming weeks.

We call on workers who want to continue the fight for a safe, functioning healthcare system to reach out to us today to join and build the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee and sister committees at other workplaces across the US and the world.



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