A reply to President Biden from California health care workers: “No, the country is not better prepared for COVID than last year!”

Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee
24 December 2021

The following statement was approved for circulation after an emergency meeting of the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee on Wednesday evening. To contact the committee, e-mail Kaiserwrfc@gmail.com or text (213) 419-0737.

The massive surge in the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is now under way across the world. In the United States, cases have already surged passed 200,000 per day, and the University of Washington estimates that more than 2.8 million Americans will contract the virus *each day* by the end of next month. Without question, this is the most serious phase of the pandemic yet.

This outcome was entirely preventable. For more than a year, medical health experts have been warning about the potential emergence of new and more-infectious variants and urged public health measures such as the closure of workplaces and schools to contain the virus and prevent this from happening. But nothing was done. The government refused to carry out policies that would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives because this would have hampered profits and rising stock market values. The public has been repeatedly lied to, by officials and media outlets that claimed the pandemic was on the wane, there was “light at the end of the tunnel,” and so on.

We are now about to enter the third year of the pandemic. We workers at Kaiser Permanente like health care workers across the US and the globe, are exhausted, burnt out and angry, and now grappling with the most serious period of the pandemic yet.

In Biden’s address to the country Tuesday, the president declared categorically that he would not carry out lockdowns or any other serious safety measure, outside of encouraging people to get vaccinated. He justified this do-nothing approach by claiming that the country is much more “prepared today for what’s coming” than it was in March 2020, when limited lockdowns and quarantining were implemented nationwide.

The “three big differences between now and then,” he claimed, are the existence of vaccines for COVID, the supposed better preparedness of the hospital system, and an understanding of “how to keep our kids safe from COVID in school.” He went so far as to claim that “children are as safe in school as anywhere else” and don’t need to be quarantined if they are exposed.

We are stunned by the level of falsehoods contained in this speech. First, it is not true that people who are vaccinated are safe. It is well known that the Omicron variant is so infectious that it renders even two doses, without a third booster shot, ineffective at stopping infections, and even Biden himself was compelled to admit in the same speech that many vaccinated people will be infected. Second, the claim that schools are safe has no basis in reality. Schools are the primary source of outbreaks. Child deaths from COVID have been on the rise in recent months, and we know from our own experience that our ER units are receiving increased numbers of children with severe COVID cases.

But perhaps the biggest falsehood of all is that the hospital system is prepared for the Omicron surge. We issue this blunt warning to workers and general public: **The hospital system is much worse off now than it was in March of 2020. We have been worn to the bone after two years of COVID.**

Even at this early stage, many areas of the country are already running out of hospital beds, and nearly 8,000 COVID patients are admitted to hospitals each day. But this does not tell the whole story. Conditions inside the hospitals have deteriorated and, as at other workplaces, basic safety measures are being discarded.

Here is what is happening at Kaiser Permanente facilities on the West Coast:

• Two years on, there is still not adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Many of our coworkers are still making do with surgical masks instead of N-95s, which are not even required by the hospital administrations, contributing to the airborne circulation of COVID in hospitals.

• COVID surveillance among the workforce is entirely inadequate. Even though many of us come into contact every day with infected patients, hospitals are relying only on self-reporting and weekly testing to track the spread of infections among hospital staff.

• Hospitals are still allowing visitors, with only limited precautions. Many visitors take off their masks in hospital rooms, and what protocol exists is impossible to enforce. Many hospital visitors are no doubt asymptomatic carriers who are unwittingly spreading COVID while visiting loved ones.

• Staffing ratios are still stretched to the limit. In California, we are working to the legal maximum nurse-to-patient staffing ratio under state law, in violation of our union contract.

• Management is turning a blind eye to the spread of COVID among staff. Only recently at one of our facilities did they even bother to discourage workers from attending Christmas parties

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over the holiday season. They still pretend that infections only occur outside of the workplace.

• Our 80 hours of supplemental COVID sick leave is not being replenished. If we have used it up already, we have to use our allotment of normal sick days. This amounts to economic blackmail to pressure us to work even if we are sick.

• In Northern California, where 700 stationary engineers had been on strike for months until they were sent back to work this week by the union without a contract, critical equipment has been maintained by totally untrained scab labor, calling their reliability into question.

• Management is attempting to address severe staffing shortfalls with travel nurses and a paltry $400 in incentive pay for us to take on extra shifts. But at this point, no amount of money is enough to convince health care workers to take up jobs at a hospital or to work longer hours, which will only increase their odds of contracting COVID and spreading it to their loved ones. Many of our colleagues are considering seeking work outside of hospitals or leaving the profession altogether. As those who remain get infected, this will produce even more severe shortages.

But even if they were able to entice people with economic incentives, there simply are not enough nurses on Earth to deal with the forecasted surge, which will quickly overwhelm hospitals. In his speech, Biden bragged about stockpiling "gowns, masks, and ventilators to deal with the surge of hospitalizations," as well as plans to build temporary wards in parking garages. But how can this help when there are no people to wear the PPE, or operate the ventilators, or staff the makeshift wards?

Hospitals should be the last, not the first phase of the strategy to fight the spread of this deadly disease. Everything should be done to prevent people from having to go the hospital in the first place. This means everything must be done to suppress and stop the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 until it is eliminated entirely.

Such a strategy, long proposed by the world's most principled scientists, begins with the emergency shutdown of all schools, nonessential workplaces and nonessential travel immediately. This must be combined with universal testing and the most robust program of contact tracing and quarantining, along with the allocation of the resources necessary to provide full income to workers during the temporary shutdown. If this does not happen, the hospital system in the United States faces imminent collapse—not in months, but in weeks and, in some areas, even days.

Biden has completely rejected these life-saving measures. Instead, the president and his fellow Democrats and Republicans have assured big business that nothing will be done to interfere with their profits during the holiday shopping and travel season and beyond.

If lives are to be saved, then the working class must take action to save them. This is exactly what teachers, manufacturing, meatpacking and other workers did in March 2020, when they launched a series of wildcat strikes, centered in the auto industry, to force schools and workplaces to shut down.

We call on workers in the factories and other workplaces, as well as educators across the country: **Organize now to shut down workplaces and save lives!** Demand that during these shutdowns, that the livelihoods of workers and small business owners are protected.

This requires a fight against the pro-company unions, which have helped management keep the country open during repeated surges. The Alliance of Health Care Unions sabotaged our own struggle, canceling a strike by 32,000 Kaiser Permanente workers and enforcing a new contract that does nothing to address chronically low staffing levels and in fact commits the unions to helping management in finding further areas to cut.

This betrayal did not just impact us. We would have used our strike to not only demand the immediate allocation of resources for hospitals and public health measures, but to alert the public about the dangers of the looming winter surge. But this is precisely what the unions didn't want because it would have jeopardized their lucrative relations with management, through which the union bureaucrats draw tens of millions of dollars over the life of the new contract.

We have launched the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee to provide health care workers with a voice and a real leadership. We insist that health care workers be provided all the necessary PPE and medical equipment and that rank-and-file committees oversee all health and safety conditions to assure that the needs of workers and patients take priority over profit.

We also urge workers: participate in the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 pandemic, including by giving your own testimony on conditions health care workers have faced and now face. To prepare for the fight ahead, we need to prepare ourselves with knowledge. We must draw the balance sheet of the past two years, explaining in detail what has happened at workplaces around the country, which individuals and institutions are responsible for carrying out these false policies, and what could have happened, and still can happen, with a correct, scientifically grounded policy.

We urge workers to take up this fight today by contacting us by e-mail at *Kaiserwrfc@gmail.com* or by text at (213) 419-0737. Alternatively, you can contact the *World Socialist Web Site* by filling out the form below.

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