

# Buffalo Veteran Affairs nurses walk out as Kaiser mental health clinicians set August 15 strike deadline

Shannon Jones  
3 August 2022

Nearly 400 nurses struck Tuesday at the Buffalo Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Buffalo, New York. The walkout is the latest struggle by health care workers against surging inflation, short staffing and intolerable working conditions, which have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time that Buffalo VA nurses struck, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) set an August 15 deadline for 2,000 Northern California Kaiser mental health clinicians.

Buffalo VA nurses, who are members of National Nurses United (NNU), walked out in opposition to grueling 20-hour rotating work shifts that are leading to burnout and the further erosion of staffing and undermining patient care.

“One of the issues that we find is that we can get nurses here, but they don’t stay because of the rotation of the schedule,” nurse Kimberly Wallace told WGRV television. “If your body won’t let you work nights because you have high blood pressure, diabetic, anything like that and you have to rotate, it throws your internal body clock off. We have nurses who want to work straight nights or straight evenings or straight days, and they say no, you have to rotate and that causes problems.”

The impact of health care understaffing was tragically illustrated by the recent reports of a patient suicide at Palomar Health in Escondido, California, as well as a patient at Orlando Regional Medical Center in Orlando, Florida, in May. After more than two years of the pandemic, health care workers are beyond the point of exhaustion, with many leaving the profession due to burnout.

The walkout by VA nurses comes as negotiations continue at other health care facilities in Western New York state, the largest being Kaleida Health where the contract for 6,300 workers expired Sunday. The workers include nurses,

dietary workers and other professional and support staff, who are members of the Communications Workers of America and 1199 SEIU United Health Care Workers East. The two unions have repeatedly extended the contract and are refusing to set a strike deadline. Union officials admit there is a “lack of progress” in talks over the critical issues of wages and staffing levels after four months of contract discussions.

It also follows strikes and protests in July by 1,200 nursing home workers in Western New York.

The horrific conditions created by the pandemic have led to an upsurge in struggles by health care workers globally. This week nurses and midwives at Launceston General Hospital in the Australian state of Tasmania struck over rising workloads and long hours that have led many to quit.

Despite enormous anger in the working class over the destruction of living standards and working conditions expressed in contract rejection votes, the unions working closely with the Biden administration continue to block strikes and impose contracts that lock in wage increases far below the current 9.1 percent annual inflation rate.

On Wednesday, the International Association of Machinists reported that workers at three Boeing military aircraft plants in the St. Louis area ratified a reworked version of essentially the same contract they voted to reject only one week ago. No vote total was released.

The IAM announced the new deal, after abruptly calling off a strike set for August 1.

The 2,500 workers who build the F-15 and F-18 fighter jets and other aircraft key to the US military arsenal were in a powerful position. The sellout was undoubtedly dictated to the IAM by the Biden administration, which was concerned

about a strike at a key defense plant as it ramps up its war drive against China and Russia. For its part, Boeing celebrated the deal, which will slash its costs as it bids for more lucrative Pentagon contracts.

According to a Boeing press release, the contract includes a \$2 per hour increase in the base wage for all employees, which equates to an average 7.2 wage hike, with much lower increases in subsequent years. The pay raise did not even cover the current inflation rate, let alone make up for seven years when wages were essentially frozen for top-tier workers. To push through what amounts to a wage cut, the union negotiated an \$8,000 signing bonus that will come to not much more than \$5,000 after taxes.

The Boeing sellout follows the appointment of a Presidential Emergency Board illegalizing strike action by over 100,000 US railroad workers, who have been without a contract for three years while confronting a brutal work regime that has led many workers to leave the industry. The railroad unions themselves had called on the Biden administration to create the emergency board, which amounted to a demand for the government to block their own members from striking.

Meanwhile 5,300 Alaska Airlines workers are voting on an agreement that will extend the expiration of the current agreement two more years until 2026. It contains a one-time wage increase of 8.9 to 17.4 percent based on classifications while locking in miniscule 2.5 percent annual raises in subsequent years.

The United Auto Workers blocked strikes by workers at Ventra and Tenneco auto parts plants in Western Michigan. Over 1,000 workers at Ventra voted down a concessionary contract that failed to offer adequate wage increases or address horrific working conditions in a plant where temperatures often reach more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius).

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has also collaborated with the Biden administration to keep 22,000 West Coast dock workers on the job more than a month after the expiration of their contract.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, despite the proliferation of contract rejections, there were just 11 work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers through June 2022, more than during the same period in 2021 but still very low by historical standards.

The total includes 1,000 miners at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama who have been on strike since April 1, 2021 and 1,200 workers at agricultural and equipment company CNH

Industrial in Wisconsin who are now in their fifth month on strike.

Smaller strikes like the Buffalo VA nurses which continue to break out are not included in the government's list of major work stoppages. Teachers in Columbus, Ohio, will vote this week on strike authorization in response to a concessionary "final offer" by management.

The pernicious role of the unions in sabotaging workers' struggles is indicated by new figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that show that increases in pay and benefits for unionized workers continue to lag far behind raises for nonunion workers. While overall compensation costs increased 5.3 percent for nonunion workers for the 12-month period ending in June 2022, compensation costs rose only 4.4 percent for unionized workers. In real terms, wages and benefits fell 3.6 percent during the same period.

The fact that real wages are falling explodes the lie that inflation is being driven by workers' excessive wage demands. In fact, inflation is being used to launch a stepped up assault on workers' living standards and effect a further transfer of wealth to the super rich. While real wages are falling, oil companies, auto companies and other sections of big business are reaping massive profits, using the inflationary surge created by the artificial pumping of cash by the US central bank into the economy to gouge the public.

Every sellout only increases the hatred of workers for the corrupt union apparatus, and increasingly strikes and other struggles are taking the form of a rebellion against the trade union apparatus.

The most conscious expression of this movement is the campaign of Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist, who was nominated last month to run for president of the United Auto Workers union. Lehman is calling for the abolition of the union bureaucracies, the building of rank-and-file committees to put the power into the hands of workers, and an international strategy to unite workers in the US with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Workers need organizations that they democratically control that are not in the pockets of the bosses. To find out more about building a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, contact the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**