

Thousands of Kaiser mental health workers begin powerful open-ended strike

Norisa Diaz
14 August 2022

Are you a Kaiser mental health worker? Tell the World Socialist Web Site what you are striking for by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Some 2,000 mental health care workers at Kaiser Permanente in Northern California are set to begin an open-ended strike today. The strike includes psychologists, therapists, chemical dependency counselors and social workers represented by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW).

A central demand by mental health workers is that their patients receive speedy access to mental health services. Workers report that patients are often forced to wait at least thirty to sixty days before receiving appointments, with some reporting having to wait months to receive care that is at times canceled at the last minute.

While Kaiser is rated AA- by the Fitch credit rating agency for its “track record of sound and consistent profitability,” it was rated the worst mental health provider in the country by the American Psychological Association.

The health care giant is required by law, Senate Bill 221, to offer an appointment within 48 hours in urgent cases, and 10 business days for non-urgent cases, to be determined by a treating clinician. If Kaiser or any provider cannot guarantee an appointment within that time period, they are required to cover an out-of-network visit with a clinician to meet those timeframes.

Instead of working to reschedule care outside of its network during the duration of the planned strike, Kaiser Permanente, the largest health care provider in the state, has responded by canceling mental health therapy appointments ahead of the strike action.

Kaiser continues to violate the law and shun patients

who are in immediate need of mental health services. The growing anger of health care workers over deteriorating conditions, lack of access for their patients, and wages declining with skyrocketing inflation has compelled the NUHW to call the first indefinite strike in its history.

Despite attempts to portray striking workers as “abandoning” patients, a number of patients have already come out in support of the strike, with one worker writing on social media. “I’m a Kaiser behavioral health patient and I want them to strike. I can only see my therapist every 5-6 weeks because they don’t have enough staff to adequately address the number of people who need services. They’ve tried working through negotiations. It’s not working. They’re still overworked and we’re still underserved.”

Mental health care workers are taking a courageous stand against the tragic conditions which often lead to the untimely loss of patients and health care workers who face chronic understaffing.

However, workers cannot leave their struggle in the hands of the NUHW or any of the corporatist trade unions which are tied to the health care giants and the Democratic Party, which has rubber-stamped the nightmarish conditions in hospitals that allowed COVID-19 to continue to rip through the population.

In December 2021, the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) called off a looming strike of some 32,000 health care workers at Kaiser Southern California over safe staffing at the eleventh hour. They then pushed through a snap vote on a concessionary contract which met none of workers’ central demands regarding staffing, workloads, or above-inflation pay increases.

In response, nurses formed an independent group, the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee (KWRFC),

which denounced the AHCU for working to smother their fight for their patients. In a statement, the committee declared, “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.” It concluded, “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.”

In exchange for shutting down the powerful strike, the AHCU was generously rewarded through the Labor Management Partnership that Kaiser pledged to fund by \$8 million a year, on top of an additional \$15 million to the Ben Hudnall Memorial Trust, a joint training program. Adding insult to injury, the contract extended the usual three-year contract to four years, locking workers into the sellout contract for an additional year.

Kaiser mental health workers must learn the lessons of the 2021 strike and look to the untenable conditions in their own hospitals, where the trade unions have overseen short staffing and worked to keep workers on the job despite chronic understaffing and declining conditions.

In order to oppose not only Kaiser, but attempts by the NUHW to prematurely end their strike before it has won their demands, mental health care workers must begin now to form a rank-and-file strike committee covering every location and workplace. They must not return to work until their demands are met.

This committee would be run by health care workers themselves, independent of the pro-management union bureaucracy. It would provide the framework for strikers to make an appeal for the broadest possible support and unity from health care workers across the country and worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which includes representatives of health care workers from countries around the world.

There is enormous potential for the strike to link up with other health care workers, including nurses, janitorial and cafeteria staff, throughout Kaiser and beyond. Some 8,000 Sutter nurses in Northern California have been kept working without a contract by the California Nurses Association. In Australia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and other countries, health care workers

are fighting for safe staffing ratios and better working conditions.

There is widespread support for the strikes of health care workers and a growing understanding that the profit motive must be removed from health care. The most liked comment on the social media page of the NUHW announcing the canceling of appointments for patients states, “Capitalism and Healthcare are incompatible.”

Workers must begin building their own democratic organs, rank-and-file committees to fight for their intersecting demands. We urge health care workers to contact the WSWs for assistance in forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact