

# Kaiser mental health workers continue five-week strike as unions instruct 20,000 Kaiser nurses to cross picket line during contract struggle

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Two thousand Kaiser Permanente mental health employees in Northern California have been striking for five weeks against inhumane working conditions and severe understaffing, which limits their patients' access to mental health care.

Mental health workers have shown their determination to fight these intolerable conditions, but without strike pay, workers are growing increasingly concerned about how they can continue to make ends meet in one of the most expensive areas of the country.

This is the third strike by Kaiser mental health workers since 2015. One former Kaiser therapist told WSWs reporters last week, “We’re having a heat wave—imagine spending your day marching around picketing and chanting in 100+ degree weather without any idea when you’ll be financially secure again. Yes, Kaiser is one of the better paying places, but it comes at a massive cost. I would have to budget my annual income minus a few thousand dollars here or there for inevitable strikes.”

Rather than support workers with strike benefits, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) has responded by organizing donation-based “hardship funds,” planning picnics and breakfasts and parading various Democratic Party politicians to the picket line for photo-ops.

The NUHW recently celebrated the disbursement of \$160,000 raised in the general Northern California hardship fund to the various locations which would amount to an insulting \$80 per mental health worker if distributed equally.

While workers are being starved and isolated on the picket line, there have been no serious or detailed updates

on the state of negotiations released on the NUHW website. Nor has the NUHW done anything to rally its additional 14,000 members across the country.

In the same hospital system another 20,000 northern California Kaiser nurses' have been engaged in contract struggles since June and, as of August 31, have been working under an expired contract. These Kaiser nurses, members of the California Nurses Association (CNA), are determined to fight to improve their wages and conditions in a healthcare system that has been brought to the brink of collapse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The CNA called a two-hour informational picket in response to the growing frustration and anger of its members as contract negotiations dragged on without results. In the union’s press release not a single reference was made to the strike of mental health workers.

The Kaiser nurses are well aware of the struggle of their brothers and sisters in the mental health departments. Nurses too, face the repercussions of an underfunded and overburdened mental health system.

Not only do nurses and other healthcare workers require prompt and effective care as a result of overwork and second hand trauma, but nurses also struggle to manage patients with untreated or undertreated mental illness.

While working short-staffed, nurses are pushed to manage a patient’s severe behavioral problems, screen and watch patients who are suicidal and risk their own safety treating patients who can have angry or violent outbursts.

While Kaiser nurses are facing similarly exhausting and unmanageable workloads, the CNA is having its members cross the picket lines of the mental health workers every day.

Kaiser health care workers must understand that they face a battle on two fronts. They are fighting against the largest health care “non-profit” in the country and the corporate-backed politicians who defend it. At the same time, they are in a fight against the pro-company health care unions, which are allied with the Democratic Party and integrated into Kaiser’s management structure through the corporatist bodies such as the Labor Management Partnership. Nurses and mental health workers should review the experience of Kaiser struggles in 2021 in which 50,000 Kaiser workers on the West Coast and Hawaii were betrayed by dozens of unions.

Kaiser workers are not fighting alone. There is a growing upsurge of unrest among health care workers, who are being pushed to the breaking point by exhausting patient loads and working hours.

Earlier this week, 15,000 Minnesota nurses conducted a three-day strike in one of the largest private health care strikes in US history. In Pennsylvania, 700 nurses and other workers in 14 nursing homes just ended a week-long strike over poor pay, dangerous working conditions and low staffing across the state’s nursing homes. An additional 6,300 nurses and staff at Kaleida Health in western New York are voting for a strike authorization this week and 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine are fighting to strike against the wishes of the Michigan Nurses Association.

These struggles are not emerging out of nowhere but are in response to the continued siphoning of funding away from patient care and into the pockets of giant hospital chains, insurance companies and others that dominate every aspect of the healthcare system under capitalism. This failing system leaves health care out of reach for millions and public health infrastructure buckling. The COVID-19 pandemic faces little resistance from an already distressed health care system and is allowed to spread unchecked through communities leaving health care workers battered and exhausted in the wake of its continued surges.

The NUHW and the CNA continue to usher support behind the Democratic Party, pointing to various politicians and Senate bills as the answer to health care workers’ struggles. This is the same party that has overseen the ending of basic public health measures, allowing COVID to rip through their hospitals, killing thousands of health care workers. First Trump and then Biden pushed the bi-partisan “herd immunity” policy and campaigned to reopen schools. More than one million have died unnecessarily and millions more are suffering

from Long Covid to protect the profits and stock portfolios of the financial elite.

The Kaiser unions, including those such as the CNA, Operating Engineers (OE), and NUHW, are inextricably linked to the Democratic Party. According to federal LM-2 filings for 2021, the IUOE, CNA and NUHW each contributed \$13.5 million, \$7.8 million and \$1.4 million, respectively on political donations, which largely consisted of members of the Democratic Party. Regardless of these large contributions, neither the CNA nor the NUHW paid any strike money in that year.

These unions make empty pleas to Democratic Party politicians to stop Kaiser's exploitation of its employees, despite the fact that the health system that Kaiser's cost-cutting methods are bringing into place is exactly the one that the Democratic Party wants. In 2010, Democratic President Barack Obama pointed to Kaiser as the model for his so-called health-care reform. Kaiser is essentially the blueprint for how the Democratic Party envisions all health care for the working class to be in the near future.

Kaiser mental health workers are taking a stand for all health care workers, and for all workers. They are fighting for workers across all industries to have access to high quality, affordable health care and for the safety and well being of the population to take precedence over the fortunes of the wealthy elite. But for this struggle to succeed it must grow by uniting with workers who are striking or fighting back across all industries.

This means forming a rank-and-file strike committee and uniting mental health workers at every hospital in order to establish direct lines of communication with other Kaiser workers, Sutter, Stanford, University of California and other nurses, to build up support for statewide strike action.

Committees of rank-and-file workers will provide a way for nurses to break through the sabotage of the pro-corporate union apparatus and assert the power of health care workers on the floors of the hospitals and clinics.

For more information and for discussion on rank-and-file committees, contact us by filling out the form below.



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