

85,000 Kaiser Permanente workers begin strike authorization vote

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Do you work at Kaiser? Tell us why you're voting for the strike and what you're fighting for. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Workers at Kaiser Permanente, one of the US's largest "non-profit" health care companies, began a strike authorization vote over the weekend. The Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions, (CKPU) which includes locals from the Service Employees International Union and several other unions, are one of multiple bargaining coalitions at Kaiser, and has under its umbrella some 85,000 healthcare workers spanning seven different US states and the District of Columbia.

The strike vote is taking place in the context of the twofold surge of the coronavirus pandemic and of the class struggle. Both are being driven by the ruling class' ruthless drive to protect and enlarge its profits at the expense of the working class and of society as a whole, while freeing up resources for war against Russia and China.

Should Kaiser workers strike, they would join tens of thousands of striking writers and actors around the country. More than 150,000 autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (formerly Chrysler) have also voted by 97 percent to strike, and their contracts expire in a little over two weeks.

Around 177 strikes have occurred in the United States as of early August, according to USA Today, citing figures from Bloomberg Law. Becker's Hospital Review reports that 13 of these took place among healthcare workers, and a strike of 1,700 nurses is ongoing in New Jersey. Last year, more than 2,000 mental healthcare providers at Kaiser also struck for more than two months.

However, a key obstacle to the working class is the trade union bureaucracy, which is working closely with management and the Biden administration to turn back the growing tide of strikes and other forms of struggles and enforce substandard contracts. Only days before the strike vote began at Kaiser, the Teamsters union declared it had ratified a contract at UPS, in a process which was designed to overcome substantial opposition and produce the desired outcome.

At Kaiser, the union bureaucrats called off strikes in 2019 and 2021 at the last second and forced through sellout contracts. The consequence of this is not only worse working conditions for healthcare workers, but worse outcomes for patients.

In opposition to this, workers across the world are organizing rank-and-file committees to rebel against the corrupt bureaucracy and transfer control of the struggle to workers themselves.

The surge of COVID-19, driven by the complete elimination of all public health measures, is developing side by side with the opposition of workers to the social and economic disaster which the official response to the pandemic has produced. COVID-19 hospitalizations have doubled in the US since late June. Driven on the one hand by the new Omicron EG.5 variant, and on the other by the anti-scientific policies of the CDC and WHO—which are even at this point lifting masking requirements in hospital settings—healthcare workers not only confront an increased workload, but exposure to a potentially deadly and highly contagious virus.

Around the country, they have dealt with chronic understaffing and overwork even since before the pandemic, which has only gotten worse. Burnout has become such a problem that the annual turnover rate in healthcare is a whopping 21 percent, and a shortage of nurses has become a national problem. All studies on the issue have shown that patients are directly affected by this, and receive a lower quality of care as a result.

For its part, Kaiser has reported over \$3 billion in profits over the last six months, despite being a tax-exempt "nonprofit." Kaiser's CEO was paid more than \$16 million in 2021, and the company made about \$95 billion in annual revenues.

They are determined to do whatever it takes protect this money from demands by workers to invest it into patient care and better working conditions. Dave Regan, the president of Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West, has said that Kaiser is currently

recruiting strike breakers and is offering them three times healthcare workers' current wages.

Following the playbook established by the Teamsters bureaucracy, the CKPU is organizing a fake "strike-ready" campaign in order to get out in front of the opposition of its members and prepare the way for a sellout which it has already worked out with management. After announcing the vote, union representatives lead members in demonstrations, chanting "strike ready!"

The American union bureaucracy evidently believes that the Teamsters have established a promising means of getting in front of growing opposition from below. The United Auto Workers bureaucracy, led by its new president Shawn Fain, who was involved in numerous sellout contracts, has also unveiled a "strike ready" campaign of its own. In reality, the UAW is being tasked by the auto companies and the Biden Administration with clearing the way for a massive attack on autoworkers' jobs, as part of the global transition to easier-to-build electric vehicles.

While representatives of the CKPU have acknowledged understaffing and overwork in public statements, they made little mention of the raging pandemic in the very workplace that is most immediately affected by it. The strike vote itself is also limited to authorizing an Unfair Labor Practice strike, a legal category which limits workers' abilities to raise economic demands.

While Kaiser workers are determined to fight, and this will likely be shown in a near-unanimous strike vote, the union bureaucrats are determined to either prevent a strike or, if that becomes impossible, to limit its impact as much as possible.

The same organizations now falsely declaring to be "strike ready" not only canceled the last planned strike in 2019. They are also members of the Labor Management Partnership (LMP), a corporatist body at Kaiser whose website explicitly states was founded in the 1990s to prevent strikes and "enter into a new way of doing business" based on uniting management and the trade unions "around our common purpose." The union bureaucracy at Kaiser receives millions of dollars in corporate funding through this scheme, which is similar to other "joint" programs set up over the last 40 years by the corrupt union bureaucracies in other unions.

In preparing for the potential struggle at Kaiser, it is necessary for workers to draw the lessons of the 2021 contract covering the other major bargaining coalition at Kaiser, the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU). Over 100,000 Kaiser workers voted overwhelmingly to strike, but two days before the strike was set to begin, the AHCU announced a last-minute deal and called it off. Several one-day actions were held, less as a means to in any way put

"pressure" on Kaiser and more as a means to let workers blow off some steam.

The agreement which was rammed through included raises below inflation, and no changes to staffing or hours other than the creation of a few feckless union-management staffing committees. Meanwhile, the AHCU isolated a strike by 700 operating engineers in Northern California. In exchange, the AHCU received \$48 million in funding from Kaiser via LMP and other joint programs.

To fight this betrayal, Kaiser nurses founded the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee. In its statement against the contract, the Committee declared:

"By shutting down our fight for adequate resources for hospitals and public health, they are endangering the lives of the public, at precisely the point when a new and massive winter surge of the coronavirus pandemic is underway.

"Our strike could and should have been used to build a movement in the working class to fight for an elimination strategy for the pandemic. The growing number of strikes and the growth of the pandemic are completely connected. Everything workers are fighting for, whether it is workplace safety, wage increases above inflation or rational working hours, has been made immeasurably worse by policies motivated not by public health but Wall Street profits, which have allowed the virus to spread for two years."

The statement concluded: "The Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee will fight to build the widest possible lines of communication between Kaiser workers and other sections of the working class. In particular, we look forward to collaborating with our sister rank-and-file committees across the country and the world, including those" in the auto industry and in education.

"We propose that a central focus of this collaboration be the development of a campaign in the working class to fight for the elimination of the coronavirus pandemic. Let us band together to harness our growing movement to demand a change to finally bring the pandemic to an end, once and for all!"

This is the strategy which Kaiser workers should organize and fight for today.



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