

Kaiser and other SEIU workers speak out against intolerable working conditions and living standards

Our reporters
7 September 2023

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.

The strike authorization vote by some 85,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest “non-profit” healthcare systems in the US, continues this week. The workers fall under the umbrella of the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU), which includes several locals of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other unions, spanning seven states and Washington D.C.

Voting takes place through mid-September, though many locations have already concluded voting. One notable vote concluded on Monday at SEIU Local 105 in Colorado, which announced that its 3,000 members at Kaiser voted 99 percent to strike. The vote is a sharp reflection of the mood shared by workers across the Kaiser system and the healthcare system as a whole, that a strike is the only way to fight for better wages, benefits and working conditions that have been steadily dismantled by Kaiser, with the tacit agreement of the unions, for decades.

The vote is also an expression of the need to fight back against the spread of COVID-19, which is currently surging. Several subvariants of Omicron are circulating worldwide, including the XBB.1.5 ‘Kraken’ subvariant and the newly discovered BA.2.86 ‘Pirola’ subvariant. Every week, millions continue to be infected or reinfected, tens of thousands emerge with new Long COVID symptoms and thousands die.

The WSWs spoke with Kaiser healthcare workers and other members of SEIU in Southern California about their working conditions and their demands for the upcoming contract. All names have been changed to

protect the workers from retaliation.

Amanda has been a certified nursing assistant (CNA) for 11 years at Kaiser in the Los Angeles area. “Sometimes we are short on staff. Short staffing is a definite issue.

“With COVID there's a new surge coming up. The number of cases is starting to go up. We had four yesterday. We usually have two or one on our floor. And they're going up on the other floors, they say. COVID is not over. It's not.

“When that happens, it just means that there's going to be more patients in a room. You've got to be more equipped. You've got to wear more equipment, which takes more time. They have to bring in more staff. In general, it's more work on us. They haven't asked us to do overtime, not yet.

“Right now they're starting to get more RNs coming in. Before that, the CNAs had to cover almost everything, as much as the RNs, except for medication.

“Another thing. They're not giving the COVID shots like they normally did before. If you wanted a shot, you could get it. But now people are asking for it, and they won't give it to them. Both the public and the employees.

“I got like five shots. Some people only got two shots, and they can't get anymore. They're trying, they're asking, but they won't give it to them. The hospital is supposed to administer it, but for some reason they're acting like they're short, they don't have it.”

Alyssa has worked for 12 years at a Kaiser Permanente in Southern California. “It's not an easy job, to be honest with you. It takes dedication. You've got to have it in you. But also, it's not fair when the

upper people are enjoying the benefits while we are the ones here struggling. You know what I'm saying?

"The CEO of Kaiser made more than \$16 million in 2021—\$16 million! That was two years ago.

"I've been a nurse since 2016, first as a CNA, then as an LVN and now I'm an RN. I am tired. It was a busy shift last night because my patients were all bedridden. The ratio is one nurse to four patients. It can be one to five, but usually one to four. It's okay, but they were bedridden, which means you're lifting dead weight. You have to lift them to reposition them."

Jane is a young RN and recently started at Kaiser. "There's unbelievable understaffing. I just got off of a rough shift. I'm exhausted. I'm an RN, but I was assigned as a sitter for two hours. That means I had to sit with a patient and observe.

"We didn't even have a charge nurse. Most of the staff were like 70 percent travelers and 30 percent staff. We're severely understaffed, and it's just not a good experience. Yes, I'm stressed.

"It's supposed to be a 12-hour shift, but I clocked in at 7:09 last night, and I literally just got out five minutes ago. It's after 8:00 a.m. now. So I'm trying to get home because I'm working tonight."

The WSWS also spoke to a group of Planned Parenthood workers not affiliated with Kaiser, at a San Diego Labor Day Rally headed by healthcare union SEIU-UHW. They noted that, "We need a better work life balance. We have to do mandatory overtime which keeps us at work into 6 or 7 p.m. every evening."

One of the workers said that he felt "healthcare needs to be affordable, it's crazy that for healthcare workers we still have to pay so much, 100 percent of healthcare should be paid for us."

Another CNA told reporters she makes \$22/hour and that many workers in her position make \$21-25 an hour. "Many of my coworkers have to work two CNA jobs, I don't know how people do it. If it wasn't for my husband I'd probably be in that position."

In addition to poor pay she stressed that the shortage in staffing means that she is often floated to other floors where the staff don't know you and sometimes face poor treatment. "We get floated to floors we aren't familiar with, we suffer and so do patients as we don't know where anything is."

Mia and Jessica are two medical assistants who told the WSWS they believe wages need to increase

significantly, "by at least 25 percent," with one adding, "I cannot afford childcare. I love patient care but cannot live on this. Many of us have training, some of us have bachelors or we are certified. \$21 an hour is not enough, we are short staffed, but we also know that at any moment they can take away our positions and that we have no job security."

They agreed that the SEIU-UHW had accepted the poverty wages of workers, and said of the unions "they collect their dues money while we are struggling."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact