

Kaiser healthcare workers must prepare for their fight: Study betrayal of 2019

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Voting for strike authorization is underway for the 85,000 healthcare workers employed at the major US healthcare corporation Kaiser Permanente. While voting is set to continue through mid-September, voting by 3,000 Kaiser workers in Colorado, members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 105, has already concluded, with 99 percent voting to authorize a strike. The Colorado vote reflects broader anger over Kaiser working conditions and points to the likelihood of an overwhelming vote for strike authorization across Kaiser facilities.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Kaiser and other SEIU workers in San Diego, Santa Clara and Los Angeles, California. Many reported that they are mainly concerned with wages and staffing.

A medical assistant in San Diego told WSWS reporters, “I cannot afford childcare. I love patient care but cannot live on this. Many of us have training, some of us have Bachelor’s 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.”

Kaiser workers are on the verge of a serious fight, and healthcare workers across the country are watching closely. In order to prepare and prevent a betrayal, Kaiser workers must study the 2019 contract struggle when, after working for a year without a contract, the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) worked out a last-minute deal behind the backs of rank-and-file workers and called off the strike, ending their struggle when workers were in their most powerful position.

The 2019 contract was touted as a “major victory” by the CKPU bureaucrats, but it is the very conditions and poverty wages created by that so-called “victory” contract that are pushing workers to fight for significant gains in another strike. After the 2019 experience, workers are rightly concerned that the current machinations of the CKPU leadership are another betrayal in the making, unless matters are taken into the hands of the rank and file through the building of their own independent rank-and-file committees.

Far from a “major victory,” the 2019 contract contains nothing to concretely improve the working conditions at Kaiser. Major issues that workers were prepared to fight for, such as staffing and wages, were addressed with new “committees” and

empty promises and vague plans. Union officials have provided no explanation for why the “victory” of the 2019 contract has resulted in a continuation of understaffing, unlivable wages and generally poor and unsafe working conditions.

CKPU includes locals from the SEIU and several other unions spanning seven US states and the District of Columbia. Workers in the coalition represent a wide range of occupations within the hospitals—lab techs, custodial staff, nurse assistants, nurses, secretaries and more.

CKPU is one of two major coalitions—the other being the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU)—that are part of Kaiser’s Labor-Management Partnership (LMP). The LMP is a corporatist body at Kaiser created amid the labor unrest in the 1980s through 1990s as a way to prevent strikes and protect Kaiser’s earnings by further integrating the unions with management.

The Labor-Management Partnership was described by Kaiser as “a new way of doing business,” which would create a “Senior Partnership Committee (SPC) consisting of Kaiser Permanente executive level staff and senior union leadership.” In this partnership the unions explicitly agreed to conceal all “proprietary information” from their members and refrain from revealing any information that could hurt the company. In exchange, Kaiser would fund the partnership, i.e., it would pay the union bureaucracies for services rendered, keeping strikes at bay and wages and benefits low.

Since its inception the union bureaucracies involved in the partnership have received millions in funding from the LMP each year. The 2019 contract alone greenlit the payments of \$8 million to the union bureaucracies through the funding of both the Ben Hudnall Trust and the SEIU Multi-Employer Trust.

On its own website, the LMP states that Kaiser and the union bureaucracy “speak the same language,” a damning indictment of the bureaucracies that claim to represent Kaiser workers.

The workers’ interests—for fair wages and safe staffing—are in direct opposition to Kaiser’s bottom line. The main concern for the LMP is to cut costs, running the Kaiser system in as lean a manner as possible despite opposition from workers and the rising cost of living.

In a damning indictment, the SEIU-UHW, the largest union in the CKPU, admits that a number of its members who work at

Kaiser are forced to live in their cars, unable to afford rent and other necessities. Staggering rises in the cost of living as well as inflation expose the rottenness of the 2019 contract, which gave a paltry 3 percent wage increases for each year of the contract. This has amounted to a pay cut as the increases are far below inflation.

For a worker making \$20 an hour working full-time, a wage increase of 3 percent each year for four years would yield an additional \$5,220 pre-taxed dollars. Especially in high cost-of-living areas such as the California Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego, where many Kaiser facilities are located, the addition of \$5,220 over four years (or about \$1,300 a year) would do nothing to significantly improve living conditions. The median rent in the working class neighborhood of Chula Vista in San Diego is \$3,700 for a three-bedroom apartment. For a family in Daly City, a relatively affordable suburb of San Francisco, the median rent for a three-bedroom apartment is \$3,800.

When you set these paltry wages against inflation, workers are actually receiving a pay cut. This month the rate of inflation is 3.2 percent, while in 2022 rates were far higher, averaging about 8 percent, with June 2022 seeing the highest rate in 40 years, at 9.1 percent. With the same \$20 an hour salary, a worker's "raise" in 2022, with an 8 percent inflation rate, resulted in a net loss of \$2,312.

Union officials share the stories of homeless Kaiser workers to local news, crying crocodile tears but fail to mention that they agreed to and celebrated these poverty wages for workers in the 2019 deal.

Furthermore, the 2019 contract's answer to the staffing crisis at Kaiser was the toothless proposal to set up committees made up of union officials and Kaiser management to, as the contract stated, "consider" various important aspects of safe staffing. These are non-binding committees that create staffing plans with no concrete demands or strong repercussions if staffing standards are broken. There is no clause in the contract that these committees include rank-and-file workers.

As another COVID-19 surge sweeps through the hospitals, healthcare workers are forced to work under increasingly dangerous conditions, with a majority of hospitals across the US operating without mask mandates or once standard protocols to test all patients and staff for infection. After almost four years of learning more about the properties and spread of the virus and the long-term health consequences caused by its infection, conditions for healthcare workers continue to be sacrificed in the interest of private profit.

The Biden administration, working with the corporatist trade unions, will do all it can in an effort to prevent Kaiser workers from going on strike because they fear its potential to spark a mass movement of healthcare workers across the country who are crying out for major improvements. It is for this reason that workers must organize now to prevent the shoving through of another sellout contract.

Kaiser workers have immense strength and would receive wide support in their fight. They would be joining tens of thousands of striking writers and actors across the country, as well as the 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Jersey. More than 150,000 auto workers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis have also voted by 97 percent to strike, and their contract expires in a little over a week.

In their fight, workers confront the obstacle of the trade union bureaucracies whose aim is to work closely with management to ram through sellout contracts, stamp out opposition and stop strikes as quickly as possible. Kaiser workers have gone through numerous struggles that expose the treacherous role of the trade unions.

In order to carry this struggle forward, workers must study, in addition to the 2019 betrayal by the CKPU, the events of 2022, when over 2,000 Kaiser mental healthcare workers were isolated on the picket line for over six months, and those of November 2021, when 32,000 Kaiser workers were betrayed by Kaiser's Alliance of Health Care Unions, calling off their strike at the last minute and ramming through a concession contract. To fight against the 2021 betrayal, Kaiser nurses founded the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

In a statement following the sellout, the committee called for workers across all Kaiser facilities and beyond to fight together to break the isolation imposed upon them by the various trade unions and to ensure that their interests, and not those of private profit, take precedence.

The only way forward is for Kaiser workers to continue to grow the network of Kaiser rank-and-file committees at every hospital as part of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). A fight for high-level medical care for patients, adequate staffing and safe working conditions is in direct opposition to the interests of the CEOs of the healthcare companies, the trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic and Republican parties.

The fight for safe, high-quality healthcare can only be waged by the working class, aimed at ending the domination of healthcare monopolies and establishing a socialist medical system that prioritizes the safety and well-being of its patients and workers.

We call on all Kaiser workers who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today to assist with the building of rank-and-file committees at your workplace.



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