

“We were there for them when they needed us throughout the pandemic, and now they don't want to pay us”

Kaiser healthcare workers demand sharp pay increases and safe staffing as strike authorization vote ends

Our reporters
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Healthcare workers across the Kaiser Permanente system, the largest “nonprofit” healthcare system in the United States, are concluding their strike authorization vote this week. The majority of voting ended on Wednesday, September 13, while some union locals at newly established Kaiser facilities in Maryland, Northern Virginia and Washington D.C. have extended the vote through Saturday.

The vote, which coincides with the looming expiration of contracts covering 150,000 US autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, has the potential to lead to the largest strike of healthcare workers in US history. Kaiser employs some 85,000 physicians and nurses across eight states (California, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Oregon, Virginia, Washington) and operates 39 hospitals and more than 600 medical offices. It generated a net income of \$2.1 billion in the second quarter of 2023 and has an estimated \$44.5 billion in cash reserves.

Like millions of workers across healthcare, auto, logistics, entertainment, education and numerous other industries and professions, Kaiser workers are determined to fight for pay that makes up for years of inflation and an end to short staffing.

Of the one local that has reported its vote so far, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 105 in Colorado, 99 percent of members voted to strike, a powerful indication of the desire by workers to fight.

Kaiser and the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU), which includes many locals of the SEIU, have until September 30 before the current contract runs out. Both have been working behind the scenes to determine how to avoid a strike.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to several Kaiser workers, many of whom noted their dissatisfaction with the current 2-3 percent raise proposal by Kaiser. A worker told the WSWs that the CKPU is asking for a paltry \$25 across the board wages to start, which will do little to pull workers out of

poverty in some of the most expensive regions in the country.

A worker in Radiology at Kaiser San Diego who wished to remain anonymous told the WSWs:

I think the demand to strike is pretty unanimous. We're understaffed. At the end of the day that affects the quality of patient care. We're so understaffed, a lot of us don't call in sick because we know we're short-staffed. We have a lot of people coming in sick because there's no one to cover their shifts. It's hard to demonstrate the burnout at the hospital, but there's a palpable sense of it when you walk in. It can be proven in data like turnover rates. What we really want is more staffing at hospitals.

Carmen, a housekeeper at Kaiser Zion in San Diego, stated, “I want to strike. We need a lot more pay and they keep making us do more and more work, like clean the on-call rooms or do patient discharges. This is all because we are so short-staffed, but it's not our job. We are always short-staffed and we can't keep up with the work that they want to keep adding to our plate.”

Carmen added, “I make \$23 and it's not enough to live on. I'd work seven days a week if they would let me. The union is calling for \$25 across the board, but even that is not enough to live on.”

Carmen also spoke on the conditions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Healthcare workers have been especially vulnerable to COVID-19, working on the front lines against the virus, often without adequate healthcare for themselves or their families. Thousands of healthcare workers in the US have died from COVID-19 since 2020 and even more are poised to fall ill as the current surge in the US continues

while all mitigation measures have been dropped. This includes the criminal dropping of mask mandates within hospitals, as tens or hundreds of thousands of Americans are infected every day.

Carmen stated, “When the pandemic began, everyone was getting super sick. We were thrown in there, we didn’t really know what was going on and we were scared. The whole time we were in harm’s way and now they don’t want to pay us.

“Even when I got COVID, they tried to tell me I had to come back in five days. I told them the state said I need to be off work for 14 days but they did not want to give me the days off. It was wrong and I could have come back to work sick if we listened to them.”

Noting the protections against COVID-19 worn by WSWS reporters, Carmen said, “You’re smart to be wearing masks; COVID is really going around. There was an elderly woman; I came in to clean her room and she told me that she was standing in line next to someone at the grocery store and they kept coughing and sneezing. She caught COVID and they are going to put her on a ventilator. She’s 80 years old, it’s so sad.”

Reflecting on the recent experiences of healthcare workers, Carmen concluded, “We were there for them when they needed us throughout the pandemic, and now they don’t want to pay us.”

She also told the WSWS that the SEIU is planning to pay strike pay of only \$70/day, or about three hours of work. Workers must be warned that this is a tried and true tactic of unions to starve workers out on the picket lines, especially those who already make poverty wages and are living paycheck to paycheck. Nurses, technicians and physicians must demand a full day’s pay for strike pay to ensure that workers are not starved on the line by the SEIU.

Martha, another housekeeper, laid out the basic demands that workers need in a new contract: “More staffing, and more pay. With cost of living, we don’t make enough to make it. We get plenty of overtime, but that drains our personal time.”

Commenting on the current surge of the pandemic, Martha noted, “We are seeing more COVID-19 hospitalizations. I’m cleaning more isolation rooms, three or four a day now.”

She also expressed agreement with the fact that the 2019 contract was not acceptable and expressed agreement with the need to build rank-and-file-committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to win workers’ demands.

Tina, an urgent care nurse and a member of United Nurses Associations of California (UNAC), one of the unions under the CKPU, commented, “Our census of patients has doubled in the last two weeks! Its crazy; we went from having 40,000 to 84,000 patients,” likely caused by skyrocketing cases of COVID-19.

She called the 2021 contract “a crappy deal,” noting that she had no idea why they did not go on strike. Tina asked, “I know a lot of people, we all float and talk to each other, everyone I

know voted to strike so why didn’t we? My rent has gone up 20 percent since 2020, but the pay is not matching the cost of living increases.”

Tina said that a rumor is floating around that Kaiser may declare bankruptcy to renege on paying workers their pensions. “This is what some of the doctors are saying, and we don’t know but we wouldn’t put it past them.”

When referring to a toothless one-day picket by UNAC planned for September 19, Tina stated, “I suspect that they are going to take us out on this picket next week to claim that they have ‘done something.’”

Discussing the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Tina concluded, “This war is US-instigated, the US just kept poking at Russia and now look. I get what you’re saying about the rulers needing to have ‘labor peace’ at home to carry out the wars, but actually we should be having the least amount of peace, the most unrest, because of the huge gap in social inequality between the rich and the poor.”

If workers are to prevent another betrayal like they experienced at the hands of the CKPU and SEIU in 2019, after toiling for a year without a contract, and the 2021 betrayal by UNAC and the unions’ part of the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU), then workers must study the critical lessons of both struggles, as well as the rotten Labor-Management Partnership (LMP), set up for Kaiser to pay the unions millions each year for services of keeping the workforce in check and halting strikes.

Since its inception, the union bureaucracies involved in the LMP have received millions annually, with the 2019 contract alone granting \$8 million to the union leadership through funds directed at both the Ben Hudnall Trust and the SEIU Multi-Employer Trust.

The only way forward is for Kaiser workers to establish a network of rank-and-file committees at every hospital, in coordination with autoworkers, educators, logistics workers, and workers in other industries, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These committees are fighting to transfer power to the rank-and-file workers, whose struggles have been suppressed and who have been denied any access to negotiations by the union bureaucrats. Rank-and-file committees, run democratically by workers themselves, are the organizations by which workers must organize and fight for their demands. To learn more about building a rank-and-file committee at your hospital, fill out the form below.



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