

Kaiser workers vote overwhelmingly to strike, warn of a new influx of COVID-19 patients

Katy Kinner

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Workers at Kaiser Permanente have voted by upwards of 98 percent to authorize strike action in an overwhelming expression of determination by workers to fight for safe staffing and fair wages amidst rising inflation and the continued spread of new COVID-19 variants.

The results were announced Thursday by the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU), with just two weeks until the contract for 85,000 Kaiser workers expires on September 30.

The CKPU encompasses four different unions—the largest being the SEIU-UHW (60,000 workers) and the SEIU (12,000 workers)—and spans seven US states and the District of Columbia, staffing 39 hospitals and 600 medical offices.

Workers in the coalition represent a wide range of occupations within the hospitals, including lab techs, custodial staff, nurse assistants, nurses, secretaries and more. Voting is still in process in several locations, including at Kaiser facilities in Baltimore and Virginia.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to workers outside Kaiser Permanente Panorama City near Los Angeles. Juan, an Emergency Services Tech with 15 years of experience in healthcare, told the WSWS about conditions that have driven workers to vote for a strike, stating, “I would like to see the Kaiser executives come down and do what we do. I want the Kaiser executives to know that we put our blood, sweat and tears into taking care of the patients...”

“They stay in their offices, air-conditioned buildings, and they don’t have any idea what it’s like to have an ER lobby filled with 15 to 25 patients. Everyone’s looking at you, they’re frustrated and in pain while we are short-staffed, working with crazy workloads and being stretched very thin. They are able to get bonuses. They are able to live this lavish lifestyle. But God forbid, if we come one minute late, that is a write-up.”

Juan also spoke about the high rates of burnout suffered by him and his coworkers, which were greatly exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. “We weren’t really ready for a pandemic. We didn’t have N95s. We didn’t

have enough surgical masks. We didn’t have certain items that we needed in order to protect ourselves to take care of the patients. A lot of us got COVID. A lot of us got really sick. Some of us had family members that died because we brought COVID home. Did we get reimbursed for that? No. We lost loved ones.”

While workers are ready and eager to fight, the SEIU-UHW bureaucracy is already preparing a betrayal behind their backs. In a five-paragraph letter featured on the front page of the SEIU-UHW website, the union leadership specified four times that any strike they call would be an “unfair labor practice” (ULP) strike, which could be called off once Kaiser administrators supposedly resume “good faith” negotiations.

Unions have a long history of using such ULP strikes to explicitly prevent workers from raising demands or even making statements related to compensation and working conditions. This allows the unions to call off a strike at a moment’s notice if the employer supposedly ceases its “unfair labor practice.”

In other words, after expressing fake concern to the media about the fact that many of its members are living in their cars, unable to afford rent in the areas in which they work, the CKPU leadership is actively plotting to call off the strike for livable wages and push workers to continue toiling amidst homelessness and poverty wages. It should not be forgotten that it is CKPU itself which agreed to the poverty wages its members must endure, having accepted crumbs from the multibillion-dollar healthcare behemoth.

Despite the plotting of the union bureaucrats, rank-and-file Kaiser workers are determined to win significant wage increases. Juan stated, “Kaiser wants to just give us the bare minimum, and they think that we are overpaid. If they were to share this wealth, we wouldn’t have as much homelessness. We have people working EVS [Environmental Services] with full-time jobs, and some of them can’t even afford an apartment or a studio to live in. They have a full-time job, benefits, it’s a great job. Why are they homeless?”

He also described his concerns with the spread of the new COVID-19 variants in the ER, stating, “COVID is coming back. If we get sick from work, we do not get to use our sick time. What’s the logic in that? Am I happy with that? No, I think they should bring back those COVID hours because we’re here taking care of the sick people, the sick and elderly, and we need our COVID sick pay back. Why won’t that happen? It comes down to the cost, it comes down to money.”

In 2019, the “good faith” bargaining allowed the CKPU to call off a strike of the same group of 85,000 workers and force through a sell-out contract that created the very conditions leading workers to strike today. Touted by the union bureaucracy as a “major victory,” the 2019 contract did nothing to seriously address the staffing crisis and put forward wage “increases” of 3 percent while inflation reached a record high of 9 percent in June 2022.

There can be no “good faith” bargaining with a union leadership who is in an explicit “Labor-Management Partnership” (LMP) with Kaiser executives as a way to prevent strikes and protect Kaiser’s earnings. By joining this partnership, the unions agreed to conceal all “proprietary information” from their members and refrain from revealing any information that could hurt the company. In exchange, Kaiser funds the partnership, i.e., pays the union bureaucracies for services rendered, keeping strikes at bay and wages and benefits low.

As the largest “nonprofit” healthcare company in the United States, Kaiser’s top concern is its bottom line. The company has already made \$3 billion net profit in the first six months of 2023. Kaiser’s CEO Greg Adams made \$15.6 million in 2021, and another 20 or so additional executives made upwards of \$1 million in 2021.

The nervousness of Kaiser and its unions at the anger of healthcare workers can also be seen in the union’s attempt to keep the struggles of workers isolated.

Greg, a nursing home worker and SEIU member outside the Kaiser system, spoke to WSWS reporters on his conditions and the lack of communication from the SEIU on the Kaiser strike vote. He said, “I’m in SEIU 2015, and no one from the union has said anything about this. In general the union doesn’t contact us unless we contact them. I imagine if they strike, a lot of patients would be transferred from Kaiser to our facility very quickly, and I would hope the union would say something. We should know if a lot of patients are coming, especially with our under-staffing.

“Everything workers are saying is happening at Kaiser is happening here. COVID is spreading throughout the facility now. I am paid basically the same amount as the workers who could go on strike, and we have similar issues with short staffing. The only difference is that my job has not

made us do mandatory overtime, but I am frequently picking up doubles to help pay my bills.”

Greg added, “I would support a strike at Kaiser. We all deserve better pay and safer staffing ratios.”

In order to win their fight, Kaiser workers must continue to build the Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee first formed in 2021 in response to the betrayal of 32,000 Kaiser workers by the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP). This committee will continue to fight to build the widest possible lines of communication between Kaiser workers and other sections of the working class. It will fight to lay out its non-neotiable demands that include transformative pay raises to make sure no worker is unable to afford the high cost of living.

Kaiser workers must look to the betrayal being carried out by the United Auto Workers (UAW), which has ordered the vast majority of 150,000 GM, Ford and Stellantis workers in the US to continue to labor under an expired contract, despite 97 percent voting to strike. However, this betrayal is being directly challenged by a more powerful force, the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee, which is the independent organization of autoworkers fighting to transfer power to the rank and file and for united action to prevent a betrayal of their strike by the UAW bureaucrats.

We call on all Kaiser workers who agree with this perspective to contact the WSWS today to assist with the building of rank-and-file committees at your workplace. The Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee will be linked up with the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is spearheading a global fight against the union bureaucracies that seek to straitjacket the international working class.



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