

Build a Kaiser Workers' Rank-and-File Committee to prepare an all-out strike!

WSWS Healthcare Workers Newsletter
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Join the next online meeting of the WSWS Healthcare Workers Newsletter at 2 p.m. Pacific (5 p.m. Eastern) on Saturday, October 7, to discuss a strategy to unite all healthcare workers across the industry. Register here to attend. To sign up to join and build a Kaiser Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form at the bottom of this article.

On September 30, contracts covering 75,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente will expire. After 98 percent of Kaiser workers voted to authorize a strike, the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) called a limited three-day “unfair labor practice” strike for October 4-7.

If it is not averted by Kaiser and the unions, this will be the largest strike by healthcare workers in US history, involving a diverse workforce of over 20 different professions, as wide-ranging as lab techs, nurses, janitors, food service workers, nursing assistants, phlebotomists and speech therapists. It will open a new front in the growing movement of the American and international working class against decades of declining wages and inflation, fueled by the war in Ukraine and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The strike will coincide with the struggle of 150,000 autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, who are fighting for an all-out strike against the efforts of the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy to confine their strike to a handful of facilities. In Las Vegas, educators, parents and students have organized rallies and school walkouts to improve conditions in the fifth-largest school district in the US. Tens of thousands of striking writers and actors across the country are determined to continue their struggle, despite efforts of the union leaders to end it. Last week, 1,700 nurses at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Jersey voted to continue their two-month-long strike despite losing health insurance and receiving no strike pay.

The eyes of healthcare workers across the US are set on Kaiser workers. Their strike would affect almost all of Kaiser's 39 facilities across seven states and the District of Columbia, and has the potential to spark a mass walkout of healthcare workers across the country.

Kaiser workers face increasingly intolerable conditions, which have qualitatively worsened since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The healthcare corporations' drive for profits has created dangerous conditions in hospitals for patients and workers alike. Understaffing is the most pressing issue facing healthcare workers throughout the world, including at Kaiser. The domination of the healthcare system by giant hospital monopolies, pharmaceutical and insurance companies makes it impossible for workers to provide high-quality healthcare to the population. In order to maximize profits,

healthcare systems run as lean as possible, raking in billions while telling workers there is no money to hire more staff or order new equipment.

Kaiser workers have suffered a huge decline in wages and working conditions. Wage “increases” have been far outpaced by inflation and the rising cost of living. Many Kaiser workers make only \$20-25 an hour, an unlivable wage especially in the California Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego, where many facilities are located. Food prices alone increased by 20 percent from 2018-20. At the same time, workers are continuously pushed to pick up overtime shifts or scramble to do the jobs of three or four workers throughout their workday.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has devastated healthcare workers. Over the past four years, masses of healthcare workers globally have fallen ill, died, become debilitated with Long COVID, or developed anxiety and depression from witnessing death and suffering on a mass scale. Contrary to the lies of Biden and the entire political establishment that “the pandemic is over,” SARS-CoV-2 continues to mutate into potentially more dangerous variants, with each new wave impacting the entire healthcare system. Most hospitals have ended mitigation measures such as mask mandates and routine testing, with hospital-acquired infections and deaths increasingly common.

While Kaiser workers struggle to afford rent and suffer repeated reinfections with COVID-19, Kaiser Permanente, the largest “nonprofit” healthcare company in the US, raked in \$3 billion in net profits in just the first six months of 2023. In 2021, CEO Greg Adams was lavished with \$15.6 million, while roughly 20 other executives garnered more than \$1 million.

But the massive decline in Kaiser workers' conditions and living standards would not be possible without the collusion of the CKPU bureaucracy, which directly profits from the exploitation of the workers it claims to represent.

The CKPU is one of two bargaining coalitions at Kaiser and encompasses four different unions, the largest being the SEIU-UHW (60,000 workers) and the SEIU (12,000 workers). The CKPU and the other Kaiser union coalition, Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU), are both part of Kaiser's Labor Management Partnership. The partnership links Kaiser executive staff and senior union leadership in a committee that funnels tens of millions of dollars into the union bureaucracy, which conceals information from membership, keeps strikes at bay, and limits wages and benefits.

A look back at past betrayals of major Kaiser struggles in 2019 and 2021 makes clear that the interests of rank-and-file Kaiser workers are in direct opposition to the interests of the company and its union

lackeys.

In 2019, workers in the CKPU were ready to strike after a year of working without a contract. But the CKPU worked out a last-minute deal behind the backs of rank-and-file workers and called off the strike. 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, against which workers are fighting today.

In 2021, the AHCU sold out over 100,000 Kaiser workers just two days before their strike was set to begin. The agreement, which was rammed through undemocratically, included raises below inflation and no changes to staffing or hours other than the creation of a few feckless union-management staffing committees. This betrayal isolated a strike of 700 Kaiser engineers in Northern California and set the stage for the betrayal of the 10-week strike by 2,000 Kaiser mental health workers last year by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW).

The confining of the upcoming strike to a three-day “unfair labor practice” strike—which prevents workers from raising demands and can be called off once Kaiser supposedly resumes “good faith” negotiations—is a sure sign that the CKPU is preparing yet another sellout.

The gulf between the salaries of rank-and-file union members and those of the bureaucracy demonstrates the parasitic nature of this upper echelon. In 2022, top bureaucrats in the CKPU made the following salaries:

- Vicki Jackson, CKPU Chair and SEIU-UHW executive committee member: **\$184,914**
- Francisco Preciado, CKPU Vice chair and executive director of the IFPTE Local 20: **\$197,185**
- Caroline Lucas, CKPU executive director: **\$185,341**
- David Reagan, SEIU-UHW president: **\$294,038**
- Stanley Lyles, SEIU-UHW vice president: **\$201,445**
- In addition, the SEIU-UHW has 158 people on its payroll who pull in salaries over **\$100,000**, 10 of whom rake in over **\$170,000**

To ensure victory in their struggle, rank-and-file Kaiser workers must take control out of the hands of these pro-corporate union bureaucrats and assert their own independent interests by forming rank-and-file committees at every Kaiser facility.

Such committees would provide the leadership necessary to mount a real struggle, not the phony “unfair labor practice” stunt being planned by the CKPU, and would prevent the union leadership from ramming through a sellout contract before workers even have time to study and discuss it. A network of such committees across the entire healthcare industry would create the necessary organizational structure needed for a coordinated and unified fight by workers for higher wages, safe staffing and improved working conditions.

Furthermore, by joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), Kaiser workers would establish unity with other sections of the working class globally, including autoworkers, educators, postal workers, logistics workers, and more, fighting to coordinate their struggles on a world scale.

A Kaiser Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee would democratically discuss and agree upon demands based on what workers need, not what Kaiser or the CKPU say they can afford. Among these should include:

- **Rank-and-file control over staffing standards** for each area of the workforce, to be negotiated by local rank-and-file committees to ensure that workers’ health and safety come first.

Massive wage increases of 50 percent or more, in addition to ongoing cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) to beat back inflation. Workers must be able to live comfortably and support their families in the areas in which they work.

- **The immediate ending of mandatory overtime** to allow workers to have control over their schedule.

- **The establishment of scientifically proven infection control measures** such as HEPA air filters, the safe use of Far-UV disinfection technology, high-quality PPE, and free and regular COVID-19 testing.

- **The re-establishment of additional sick pay for COVID-19 infection** to ensure that sick workers have time to recover and not infect coworkers and patients.

The CKPU bureaucracy is promoting illusions that Kaiser executives and the Democratic Party can be pressured to make real and lasting concessions to workers. But any such strategy has already proven disastrous for workers in all industries.

Last December, the Biden administration and Congress voted to ban a nationwide strike of 120,000 rail workers and impose a pro-corporate contract that did nothing to address the workers’ demands. Today, the Biden administration is directly involved in the struggle of 150,000 autoworkers, holding private meetings with UAW bureaucrats and advising them on how to stifle workers’ demands for an all-out strike.

From the perspective of the Biden administration, the upsurge of the class struggle must be tamped down to prevent the development of a unified and powerful movement of the working class, which would disrupt the war aims of Washington against Russia and China.

Kaiser workers must not seek support in either corporate-controlled parties, but with the millions of workers across the globe who are fighting against the same exploitation. There is a pressing need to build independent organizations to unite the growing struggles throughout healthcare and across all industries. This is the primary role of the IWA-RFC, and we urge workers to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* Healthcare Workers Newsletter for help in forming and building a Kaiser Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact