

Kaiser pharmacy workers in Oregon and Washington begin 21-day strike

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Pharmacy workers at United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 555 began a 21-day strike against Kaiser Permanente on Sunday. The 400 healthcare workers across Oregon and Washington were told to go out by their union ahead of and separate from the larger impending strike against Kaiser by 75,000 healthcare workers under the auspices of the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU).

The four campuses being struck by the UFCW are Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center Campus, Kaiser Westside Medical Center Campus, Kaiser Regional Lab and Kaiser Airport Way Center.

According to the press release from UFCW Local 555, the pharmacists were sent on strike because, “Kaiser has committed numerous Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs), including failing to provide information regarding bargaining and grievances, attempting to directly deal with our members, and attempting to dictate to the Union who may serve as its representative.”

No doubt Kaiser has attempted to use underhanded tactics to undermine efforts by workers in their fight against short staffing, low wages, and adequate hospital safety measures, especially amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare workers in particular have suffered greatly from the disease; the World Health Organization estimates that up to 180,000 died through May 2021, when excess deaths were placed at 9.4 million worldwide. Excess deaths since then have roughly tripled, to 28 million dead from COVID-19 or its long-term health impacts. Extrapolating, excess death data indicate that upwards of 500,000 healthcare workers around the world have likely lost their lives fighting against the deadly disease.

The underhanded tactics of Kaiser, however, will not be overcome by dividing workers into separate, smaller

strikes. UFCW Local 555 split from the CKPU in mid-September, claiming that it “could better meet the bargaining needs for pharmacy and imaging healthcare workers if they were independent from the coalition,” according to local news outlet KGW.

In reality, it weakens the position of all Kaiser workers, both those in Local 555 and those in the CKPU, by allowing Kaiser to pursue a divide and conquer strategy instead of being forced to confront the collective strength of the 75,000 healthcare workers that voted in August and September to strike.

Moreover, Local 555 has only called out pharmacists, despite acknowledging in its most recent press release that both pharmacists and imaging workers voted to walk out. That vote was approved nearly unanimously, at 99.6 percent. That only a portion of the local was called out is evidence that the leadership of Local 555 is attempting a stunt that will only result in a severe setback for the conditions of its members.

Nor has the union called for joint action among the other workers at the four facilities it has struck. In addition to the pharmacy workers, 4,000 other healthcare workers, building service workers, nursing assistants, hospital technicians and housekeeping staff also voted to strike in September.

Instead, what is emerging among strikes by healthcare workers is a series of strikes reminiscent of the impotent “stand-up strikes” called by United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shaw Fain. There, rather than calling out the full force of 150,000 autoworkers to strike General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, Fain has called on only a few plants to strike (or even just parts of plants) in order to minimize the economic impact felt by the Big Three automakers.

Similarly in healthcare, the unions, whether they are the CKPU, SEIU or UFCW, have devised a plan that

keeps the disruption of profits to the healthcare industry to a minimum. Following the corporatist playbook of unions in the US and internationally, workers will be allowed to let off steam without a broader struggle being mobilized. Even the main strike by the CKPU will be limited to just October 4-6, and is only an “unfair labor practice” strike, which can be ended any time the union bureaucrats claim that Kaiser is once again negotiating in “good faith.”

But a broader struggle is precisely what must occur! Kaiser Permanente as a whole employs 305,000 workers, all of whom face the same problems of understaffing and low wages. No section of the working class has escaped the culling of the workforce, with the pandemic as one of the main excuses, by the healthcare industry and in every other industry. And no section of the working class has escaped the inflation of the past three years, which has caused basic necessities to often double or even triple in price with no similar rise in wages and benefits.

Last week, the *World Socialist Web Site Healthcare Worker Newsletter* published a statement calling on Kaiser workers to build independent rank-and-file committees at all Kaiser facilities in order to wage a real struggle based on what Kaiser workers need, not on what the CKPU and Kaiser management say they can afford.

Workers must reject the low-ball proposal by the CKPU for an annual pay increase of 7 percent for two years, 6.25 percent for the next two years, and a minimum wage of \$25 per hour. Workers must demand at least 50 percent pay increases to make up for lost wages due to inflation, in addition to ongoing cost-of-living adjustments (COLA).

Workers should also fight for rank-and-file control over staffing standards at each workplace, the immediate ending of mandatory overtime and the establishment of infection control measures, including HEPA filters, the safe implementation of Far-UV disinfection technology, and high-quality N95 or better respirators, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other airborne infectious diseases in hospitals and other medical facilities.

The only way to achieve these demands is through a sharp break with the union bureaucrats and the formation of rank-and-file committees at each workplace that work to unite all sections of healthcare

workers in a common fight. The union bureaucracies cannot be allowed to drive another struggle into the ground, as they did in 2021 and 2019 at the behest of finance capital. If there is to be comprehensive and fully functioning healthcare, which is a social right of every worker and young person on the planet, the working class must fight for it.



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