

"The Democratic Party is no friend of ours. They lifted the guidelines on COVID and we are now dealing with different mutations."

California nursing home worker speaks on the continued spread of COVID and workers' struggles

Ike Sasson
3 October 2023

The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with a nurse at a long-term care facility in Placer County, California, about the COVID-19 pandemic and the struggle of healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente. While the nurse is not employed by Kaiser, he is a member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The interview took place shortly before union officials announced the planned three-day strike at Kaiser. The nurse's name and certain details have been changed to protect his anonymity.

Ike Sasson: Hello, thank you for taking the time to speak with us today about your working conditions. It might be good to start with a brief description of the facility you work at and how COVID has spread there.

John: Okay, so I get between 15 and 20 patients a day. We have over 40 patients at my station and there are four stations. I believe they all have 40 to 45 patients. There's usually 4 CNAs (certified nursing assistants) on the ground everyday. They try to get five, but we are so short staffed that it doesn't happen.

COVID popped up recently among 8 patients and a couple of nurses went home with positive COVID tests. It all came out of nowhere and I assume someone just brought it in. As far as I know, I worked two days ago, and there were about five patients that still had COVID in my station.

There is always PPE brought up and put on patients' doors. Management has told us that masks are not mandatory, and to wear it based on our level of comfort. So, I guess if someone doesn't want to, or pitches a fit about wearing it, they don't have to. So PPE is on several doors, but I have seen CNAs go in and out of patients rooms without getting PPE'd up or without using the hand

sanitizer. So, the virus spread faster and harder during this outbreak than when the pandemic started.

IS: Could you speak a little about your work experience more broadly during the pandemic?

J: I have been at this facility since 2020 and I got my license during the pandemic. When it started, COVID spread very fast and people were scrambling. We lost a lot of residents due to COVID because of a lack of preparation. We went through several Infection Preventionists (IPs), they are like nurses who are set up in case a pandemic like this happens. We went through several administrations because COVID hit so hard and they didn't know what they were doing.

We were sectioning off different stations. We had to use a backdoor for patients and CNAs that were working the COVID unit. I was working several different units, and didn't get sick but a lot of people did. This was also before COVID pay, so sick CNAs were working on the COVID units, but not the clean units. They couldn't go home because there was no sick pay.

There was a shortage of PPE and there was a shortage of CNAs. There were CNAs that were going to New York City, which was ground zero, which was hard work but they were leaving because of better pay than our facility. We lost a lot of residents and families weren't allowed to visit. N95 masks were mandatory. A lot of people didn't want to wear them. They didn't think they would get sick, but they got sick. It was really crazy.

IS: You're describing a situation in 2020, at the start of the pandemic. When did restrictions start to loosen?

J: I would say probably in 2022, so last year and this year.

Last May they stopped doing COVID pay, and in April masks went out the window. We had gotten COVID out of this facility several different times and it had returned several different times. We were only completely clean in the springtime this year.

IS: How did the CDC guidelines factor to restrictions being lifted?

J: The IP lady here was following the CDC guidelines, whatever Dr. Fauci was saying, and the California guidelines as well. So, whenever they would loosen restrictions, like with masks, we would as well.

We used to have a COVID unit, and we would move residents who tested positive there. But now when someone tests positive, we quarantine them in their room, and their roommate also has to quarantine even if they are testing negative. We are testing about once every five days.

As part of the recent outbreak, we started testing the patients because a few of the CNAs started to feel really ill. So they started to take COVID tests, and a lot were coming back negative, but one came back positive and that is when we started testing the patients.

IS: I know there has been a bipartisan effort to abandon any support for vaccination against COVID. Are you covered at your work or through your healthcare to get the most recent COVID booster?

J: At my facility, there is a sign saying that they are going to have a big thing about getting vaccinated for the flu, but nothing is mentioned about COVID. They fully believe what Biden said about the pandemic being over, so they don't feel the need to give out vaccinations for COVID. They don't feel they need to give out boosters, provide them for their workers. Even with COVID coming back into the facility, they didn't mention anything about the boosters.

I am on the basic government insurance, which is all I can afford since it's free. When I go to pick up my medications at the pharmacy, they ask me if I want the flu vaccination, but still I hear nothing about COVID.

Even with all the new strains, and with COVID back in the facility, still no one is talking about the boosters. When you ask, they say they are not offering it. I know a lot of insurance plans aren't covering it and I would be surprised if mine will.

IS: What has been the response of your union, the SEIU, to the recent spread of COVID throughout your facility and the possible strike at Kaiser?

J: I haven't heard anything from them. I suppose if I called them up with questions they would scramble for answers. But, they don't know what they're doing. I haven't heard anything from them, or what their guidelines are. If Kaiser does go on strike and we get an influx of patients, we may hear from them. The union has not

informed workers about any of this. Not the Kaiser strike or the UAW strike. None of it.

John recently confirmed that no official from the SEIU has contacted him or his coworkers since the strike was announced.

IS: You've also said in the past that your conditions and pay are very similar to Kaiser. Could you say a little about that?

J: What I've read said that Kaiser workers want to go on strike over low wages and short staffing. The stories I've read from the CNAs are the story that I'm living right now.

I get paid only \$21 an hour and we are short staffed. No one wants to work at the facility. And even though overtime is not mandatory, if you want to do overtime they will allow it. I am having to do 70 to 73 hours a week, just to make ends meet, and I am still living paycheck to paycheck in California.

The union was saying six months or a year ago that they were fighting for higher wages for us, and then we never heard back from them.

I've been telling my coworkers about the Kaiser strike and the autoworkers' strike. A lot of the CNAs I work with are saying we should go on strike as well. That is something I would be okay with. And, I hope that the workers at Kaiser do strike.

IS: What do you think of the Democratic Party, including their role during the pandemic and recent strikes?

J: The Democratic Party is no friend of ours. They lifted the guidelines on COVID and we are now dealing with different mutations. They say they are for the workers, but they aren't even in tune. That is why we want to strike. I used to vote Democrat, but what they are doing is no better than what the right is doing.

Biden made the railroad workers' strike illegal. They are trying to keep us separated. The autoworkers are making their bosses billions of dollar and can't get a livable wage. It's sickening. And the Democratic Party is no better than the Republican Party in this respect.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact