

“Healthcare isn’t fair in the US. It’s not fair for patients, it’s not fair for workers!”

Kaiser workers speak out on first day of strike

Our Reporters
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Join the next online meeting of the WSWS Healthcare Workers Newsletter at 2pm Pacific (5pm Eastern) this 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.

More than 75,000 unionized healthcare workers across California, Colorado, Washington, Virginia, Oregon, and the District of Columbia began a limited three-day strike against Kaiser Permanente, a “nonprofit” healthcare behemoth that amassed \$3.3 billion in profits in the last six months. The strike is the largest by healthcare workers in US history, and has garnered support from workers throughout the world.

The staff taking part in the historic labor action are predominately support staff and other employees such as radiology and surgical technicians, medical assistants, pharmacy workers, receptionists, and custodians whose collective work is indispensable to the necessary functioning of health systems.

World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke with striking workers at pickets in Los Angeles, San Diego, Oakland and Union City in California, distributing hundreds of copies of the *WSWS Healthcare Workers Newsletter* statement, “Build a Kaiser Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee to prepare an all-out strike!”

The mood of frustration and rebellion was palpable. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the chronic crisis of understaffing that has seen nurses and healthcare workers stretched beyond their capacity, making working conditions dangerous for workers and their patients. Healthcare workers have also seen their wages fall drastically due to inflation, while their benefits have been eroded substantially.

Rajwinder, a Licensed Vocational Nurse in Los

Angeles, commented, “We’re on strike for better pay, better staffing, better benefits. We deserve to be able to provide for our families. We want affordability. We want to be able to live where we work. We’re the core of Kaiser. Kaiser says we’re a family, we want to be able to take care of patients like they’re family, but what about their staff? We shouldn’t have to fight every year for our bonuses, when the CEO is getting his!”

Lyndsey, a laboratory technician in Los Angeles, remarked that short staffing is chronic at her facility. “A lot of people are having to work overtime, having to work more than their five days. A lot of people are per diem status, many of us have to go to our outlying clinics. Shifts are supposed to be eight hours, but sometimes we have to stay 10, 12 or even 16 hours. That can be almost a daily occurrence. I mean, we’re here to serve the patients. We try our hardest to help them and we’ll always make sure our patients come first. But it can be hard when we work that many days in a row.”

She added, “If our pay isn’t good and the cost of living is going up, then it’s not fair. Not having a livable wage is a part of this; we have to work those overtime hours to be able to make a livable wage, and that turns into 4 or 5 days of overtime. Kaiser is making all that money and it’s not fair. They should be able to pay us a livable wage.”

A pharmacist from Union City Local 29 told the WSWS: “This strike is necessary. We need to tell Kaiser, ‘We’re missing out on pay, but this strike is necessary.’ The main concern is outsourcing. But this is not only about Kaiser. We need to talk to the government. Since Obamacare, many of the patients we get are low income. How is it possible that Canadians can get insulin at \$5 or \$6, or in Mexico, but here it’s hundreds of dollars? Isn’t the government supposed to represent the people? But it doesn’t represent you or me.”

Multiple workers told the WSWS that many have to

commute outrageous distances, sometimes three hours one way, because the cost of living is too high where the Kaiser facilities are located. Those that do live close to their work explained they have to rent a two-bedroom apartment shared by five people, or similar overcrowded conditions. Others seek exhausting overtime to make additional income, or take on second and sometimes third jobs to make ends meet. Yet, what the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) officials are proposing—7 percent in year one and two, then 6.25 percent in years three and four—will not come close to what these workers deserve and need.

Jeff, who works for a Kaiser facility in San Diego, told the WSWS, “What brings me out are that the wages are outrageous right now. Inflation, gas prices are really high! Everyone out here deserves a raise. We earned it all through COVID, all through the pandemic. We busted our ass. We bled. I see it’s going to be hard again if Kaiser doesn’t fix the staffing shortages. Sometimes on the unit, we have one CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant] on a particular medical-surgical unit, and that’s not enough! These nurses need help, they need all of us. For patients to be safe we’d have at least two or three CNAs on each unit, like we had before COVID. They need to bring us back to before COVID when we were able to help each other out.”

Lyndsey, a nurse assistant in a medical-surgical unit in Los Angeles, said: “We are short-staffed! Usually, it should be two CNAs on a floor, but as of late, every time I come in, I’m by myself. A full floor would probably be like 23 patients. Everything’s going up but our pay isn’t. I don’t work a second job, but I should. A second job would help, but it shouldn’t be like that. One job should be able to support one person, but it doesn’t. Healthcare isn’t fair in the US. It’s not fair for patients, it’s not fair for workers, it’s not fair.”

Giovanni, a licensed vocational nurse (LVN), recalled, “During COVID, when the whole world shut down, our commitment to our patients was number one. We were still coming in day and night, making our rounds. We were called heroes, now we’re zeroes.”

Kiana, a Kaiser Permanente nurse in Maui, told the WSWS she supports the striking healthcare workers. “I work here in Maui, Lani. It’s an urgent care, part of the family practice and internal medicine, but mostly a walk-in clinic like a little emergency room. It’s very busy and the only big one on this island. I want to say I support the Kaiser workers’ strike and wish we were striking here. We are under a different union and our contract doesn’t

expire for two more years. We should have struck when our contract was up in 2021. They called it off at the last minute. I felt like they took our strength away. We weren’t being heard; we were being put off. They didn’t really care.”

The offer on the table by Kaiser for 4 percent increases ever year for the duration of the four-year contract falls far short of what is required for a living wage. The fact that CKPU has confined the strike to just three days underscores the limited impact it will have on Kaiser’s operation and betrays the union bureaucrats’ complicity in creating the horrendous conditions that now exist. Kaiser workers must fight for an all-out, open-ended strike, calling for every sector of industry to join ranks with them.

Speaking with the WSWS, many striking Kaiser workers expressed outrage at the limited strike set by the union. Many agreed that a three-day labor action was not enough and endorsed the call for rank-and-file committees to spread and expand the strike as broadly as possible.

Additional concerns raised by the workers included sick time off. Sick time requests are usually denied due to very low staff levels. Often, the best workers can get is a partial day off, where they come in four hours later to their shift and leave the same time.

Under the diktat of a profit-driven healthcare system, working conditions and wages will only worsen over the coming months and years. The basic demands that are being issued by rank-and-file Kaiser workers are the same ones being called for by autoworkers, postal service workers, educators and industrial workers across the US and internationally.

There is a unanimous outcry for improving the conditions of life for everyone, but this requires a unified struggle throughout the building of networks of independent rank-and-file committees to unite across industries and nations. To get involved in this struggle, fill out the form below.



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