

75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers begin the largest healthcare strike in US history

Bryan Dyne
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Join the next online meeting of the WSWs Healthcare Workers Newsletter at 2 p.m. Pacific (5 p.m. 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.

Some 75,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente went on strike Wednesday, the largest such action by healthcare workers in US history. The strike is set to last until Saturday morning and involves workers across California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited picket lines and passed out hundreds of leaflets containing the recent statement from the WSWs Healthcare Workers Newsletter urging workers to build rank-and-file committees to mount an all-out strike. Rajwinder, a licensed vocational nurse in Los Angeles, told our reporters, “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.”

This historic strike opens up another major front of the expanding class struggle in the US and internationally. Similar to healthcare workers throughout the world, Kaiser workers are fighting for sharp increases in pay, safe staffing levels, an end to mandatory overtime and a broad expansion of infection control measures in healthcare facilities. It is a struggle being waged by nurses, home health aides, technicians, pharmacists and emergency personnel, in which the rights and needs of the working class as a whole come up against a capitalist social order that is fundamentally incompatible with public health and the well-being of society.

Kaiser strikers are joining the many other recent and ongoing struggles in healthcare, including the strike by pharmacy workers in Oregon and Washington, nurses at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey, registered nurses and radiology technologists at Ascension Providence Rochester Hospital, senior doctors and dentists in New Zealand and National Health Service radiographers, consultants and senior doctors in Britain.

The demands put forward by healthcare workers are necessary and deserve the support of the entire working class.

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare systems in the United States had already been decimated. Hundreds of hospitals, particularly rural hospitals, have been shut down since 2000. Wages have largely stagnated, particularly in patient care positions, while inflation has continually gone up. A report from the American Medical Association found that a large majority of healthcare workers, 86 percent, work more than 40 hours a week, while 23 percent work more than 60 hours per week.

Since the onset of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers, once lauded as “heroes” by capitalist politicians and corporate media personalities, have left the profession thanks to the murderous policies enacted and promoted by those same figures. Healthcare workers have largely been left to work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), high quality ventilation or other measures to combat the spread of the virus in healthcare settings.

As a result, healthcare workers internationally have been among the most impacted by the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that up to 180,000 health care workers died through May 2021. Extrapolating from then to now, a period in which excess deaths have risen from 9.4 million to 27.5 million, upwards of 500,000 healthcare workers around the world have likely lost their lives fighting against the coronavirus.

In fighting for their demands, Kaiser workers face a war on two fronts. On one front, there is Kaiser itself, the largest “non-profit” healthcare system in the United States. Kaiser Chairman and CEO Gregory Adams makes about \$16 million a year in reported compensation, while the next 35 top executives each net more than \$1 million salaries. The Kaiser network as a whole has a cash reserve estimated at \$44.5 billion and recorded net income (i.e., profits) of \$3.3 billion in the first half of 2023.

Any claims that there is not enough money to provide better pay and hire more staff are absurd. Kaiser’s profits so far in 2023 alone are enough to provide each of the striking workers one-time bonuses of approximately \$44,000, while the gigantic cash reserve can be used to fill the tens of thousands of needed new hires at much higher rates of pay.

On the other front, Kaiser workers are facing a coalition of

union bureaucrats from the SEIU, United Healthcare West and several other smaller unions, amalgamated under the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU). The CKPU only called the strike under enormous pressure from workers, and seeks to contain it as much as possible. The CKPU called the strike three days after workers' contracts expired and only for three days, on the limited basis of "unfair labor practices" by Kaiser. This procedural maneuver blocks the rank-and-file from raising direct demands in the strike for staffing levels and compensation, and allows the union to end the strike at any time if it claims Kaiser is once again bargaining in "good faith."

Moreover, the proposals being advanced by the CKPU are minimal at best, including a 7 percent increase in years one and two of the contract and a 6.25 percent increase in years three and four, with a minimum wage of \$25 across Kaiser. Such increases would leave the overwhelming majority of Kaiser workers living in poverty, while providing nothing for future rising costs of living and in no way addressing the unbearable and unsafe working conditions.

The CKPU has raised no substantial demands to address the staffing crisis across the network that makes caring for patients increasingly dangerous. Jeff, who works in San Diego, noted, "Sometimes on the unit, we have one 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."

The disconnect between the bureaucrats and the rank-and-file was exemplified in a statement posted Wednesday morning on Twitter/X by SEIU President Mary Kay Henry, who claimed that "two million SEIU members have your backs." Henry, who garnered \$271,713 in 2022 from workers' union dues, did not explain how most of the 2 million SEIU members could continue working during the strike and at the same time "have the backs" of the striking workers.

By confining Kaiser workers' struggle to a three-day "unfair labor practice" strike, the CKPU bureaucracy is making clear that it will not wage a genuine fight to achieve any of the workers' most critical demands. Kaiser workers who are part of the coalition are still on the job in Maryland, Hawaii and parts of Washington. No substantial sympathy strikes have been called across the country in support of the key demands, even though Kaiser workers provide healthcare for an estimated 13 million people across the country. Furthermore, striking Kaiser workers are not even being given strike pay.

In her video statement, SEIU President Henry spoke of the COVID-19 pandemic in the past tense, but healthcare workers know that the pandemic is not over. Many workers who spoke with the WSWs on picket lines were wearing masks, and expressed contempt for the lies of capitalist politicians about

the pandemic.

At present, wastewater data show that the US is in the midst of a COVID wave that is infecting an estimated 500,000 people each day, with millions more infected globally. Hospitalizations have spiked, with emergency rooms filling up once again, with influenza and RSV threatening to cause another "triple-demic" this fall and winter. Throughout the world, there continue to be thousands of excess deaths attributable to the pandemic each day.

In industry after industry and strike after strike, workers attempting to fight management are held back by the privileged union bureaucrats. While workers are coming up against the capitalist system and the interests of hostile social classes, the unions preach about "labor-management partnership" and attempt to persuade workers that their demands can be achieved within the framework of so-called "labor-management relations."

The highly paid bureaucrats who run the SEIU, UHW and CKPU have long operated as agents of management and the Democratic Party. Far from launching an open-ended strike and mobilizing the broadest sections of the working class to win the wages, staffing and COVID safety that Kaiser workers need, the union executives hope to diffuse and strangle this powerful movement.

The only way for striking Kaiser workers to fight for their demands is to form their own organs of struggle. In contrast to the forced top-down coalition of union heads, workers must form independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace to democratically discuss and agree on demands that they need, not what the union or management say are "realistic."

These committees will link up with others under the umbrella of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), connecting them with other sections of the working class building such committees, including autoworkers, educators, dockworkers, postal workers, logistics workers and more.

As with all social ills confronting mankind today, the underlying disease causing the maladies of the healthcare system is capitalist private ownership. Healthcare cannot be fixed until it is socialized. That can only be achieved through a struggle by the working class, in unity with workers throughout the world. There can be no turn to either big business party—not the warmongering Democrats and their union lackeys, nor the fascistic Republicans—but to the millions of workers worldwide entering into struggle against capitalism.



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