

“We need to all be together because we are the people who are running the country”

Kaiser workers call for a united struggle with all workers for better wages and safe conditions

Our reporters
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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.

The strike of 75,000 Kaiser healthcare workers over understaffing and low wages continued into its second day Thursday. The workers involved in the largest healthcare strike in US history are predominantly support staff, who are essential to the care patients receive and resolute in their fight for better wages, staffing, and conditions.

Phuong, a sleep clinic therapist in Oakland, said, “This strike is necessary. We need Kaiser to compensate us properly. Since the pandemic, people are struggling. Everything has risen: food, gas, rent. My family is struggling. What used to be OK has changed. Kaiser needs to understand. The thought that they don’t have money for better wages is all a bunch of BS.”

The healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente collected \$3.3 billion in profits over just the past six months and is sitting on an estimated \$44.5 billion cash reserve. To create their immense wealth, Kaiser executives have kept their employees underpaid and overworked.

Matthew, a materials management worker with 10 years, commented about the 2019 contract. “The wage increases from the 2019 contract were nothing. I came to Kaiser to avoid [having to strike]. I thought it would be different here, but here we are. After you consider

inflation, we are worse off than we were four years ago.”

Many workers spoke on the economic hardship they suffer on a daily basis as a result of rising cost of living and falling wages.

Cindy, a worker in the admitting office at Kaiser Claremont Mesa in San Diego said, “Just the cost of gas itself, it’s insane. Our mortgages, our rents. We have children, we all have families, we all have bills to pay. And it’s really hard to not get the contract that we deserve. Because costs in Southern California are rising. As a single parent, it’s really hard.”

Another worker at Kaiser Claremont Mesa, a receptionist named Alma, spoke about her own struggles with the rising cost of living. “Four years ago, since our last contract, things like going without pay for a couple days wouldn’t have been a big deal. But nowadays, gas is \$6 a gallon. The price of groceries, the price of everything, the price of housing, it affects us in a major way. It is harder to get by. And I feel like that’s just what we’re doing nowadays is getting by instead of being able to save.”

Over the course of the last contract signed by the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) in 2019, workers have seen their real wages drop by 10 percent as inflation soared past their nominal raises.

In the current contract struggle, CKPU is asking for an insufficient 7 percent increase in years one and two of the contract and a 6.25 percent increase in years three and four. When inflation is considered, this would put workers barely above their pay in 2018, utterly insufficient to

support workers and their families and attract new workers to help solve the worsening staffing crisis.

Rank-and-file Kaiser workers spoke strongly about the need for improved staffing. Many described the toll it takes on them to be pushed shift after shift to work under unsafe and challenging conditions caused by short staffing.

Marjorie, a Kaiser worker at Kaiser Claremont Mesa said, “It’s heartbreaking when you know your potential, you know what you can give to the patient, but you’re unable to because of time, because of the push to move on to the next patient. You are timed. The patients look to us, to healthcare workers for support for health, for reassurance, and we cannot give that to them because our managers or supervisors are pushing us to move on to the next patient.”

Kaiser workers also described the stress and anxiety that has come with working on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst a new surge of the virus, hospitalizations have spiked, emergency rooms are filling up once again, and combined with influenza and RSV, another “triple-demic” looms over the healthcare system in the months ahead.

Esther, a care Coordinator at Kaiser West Los Angeles, said, “We had employees that passed away and we have employees who have long-term COVID effects. Where does that leave us? Sure, they give us two weeks to take off because we’re sick, but what about all the long-term effects from working directly with COVID patients?”

She continued, “We had one incident where half of our department got COVID and we were just wiped out. We had to go home and recover and come back; it’s a lot.”

Pasha, a Population Care Management Support Coordinator at Kaiser Downey in Los Angeles, spoke on the pandemic and the broader issues Kaiser workers are grappling with, stating, “I’m fighting for equality. We are just extremely tired of not being valued. We need to feed our families. We need more staff, and we need more money in this economy. We are understaffed and in some departments the wait time is three to four hours.

“I see a patient in pain and crying the whole shift because we don’t have the staff. It has taken a toll on me. Biden claiming the pandemic is over is fake news. We still have a lot of COVID cases, RSV, the flu. The pandemic is not over and it’s about to ramp back up. Rank-and-file committees are solidarity, we need to all be together because we are the people who are running the country.”

Two respiratory therapists from Kaiser Oakland, Phil

and Lydia, told the WSWs about some of the horrors they have experienced as a result of the pandemic and the worsening staffing crisis. Phil stated, “Short staffing has always been an issue and still is an ongoing issue. Talking about it is very emotional for me because I was one of the first ones that started with the COVID floor, and I never saw management there. They were always working from home or outsourced, so they were never actually there, like all of us were.”

Phil added, “I feel like we’ve been disrespected. I feel like we’ve been placed under a rock and forgotten. And then to insult us with just a mediocre offer for what we went through! We were the first ones in to see the COVID patient and the last ones out. Then after [one patient] expired or passed away, rolling to another patient that was coding. And the stress of not having the proper PPE (personal protective equipment).”

Lydia added, “Even though we were frontline workers, we never got tested. Other facilities were testing their workers on a weekly basis, and we never knew. I never knew if I was going to get COVID.

“Day to day, it was like walking into a battle zone and just having the bare minimum of equipment and never knowing if this was the day that I was going to get COVID and possibly die. It was really, really hard in the beginning. And I got all my affairs in order because I didn’t know if I was going to make it three months, you know, or even one week.”

Kaiser workers are prepared for a real fight. Many questioned the power of the three-day limited strike called by the CKPU bureaucracy and thought there should be a united struggle of workers across all industries.

Cindy, the worker in the admitting department who spoke on the rising cost of living, said, “I believe that we stand together because we all want to be heard. We all want a change. That way, not only the higher-ups get to sustain themselves or get a financial reward... The writers, UPS, everybody that’s been doing the strikes. This is us speaking up and saying, ‘Hey, we want to be heard.’ We want change because we are united and we deserve it.”



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