

Kaiser strike deepens rift between union bureaucracies and rank-and-file healthcare workers

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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.

On Wednesday, 75,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente began the largest strike of healthcare workers in US history. As the three-day strike continues, the key demands of rank-and-file workers regarding compensation and staffing are more and more clearly diverging from the conduct of the union bureaucracies, which are focused instead on utilizing the strike as a publicity stunt to promote themselves and the election campaigns of various Democratic Party politicians.

Reporting teams from the *World Socialist Web Site* Healthcare Workers Newsletter have been speaking to striking workers at Kaiser workplaces around the country on each day of the strike. At each picket line, workers have described intolerable working conditions, unlivable wages, unsafe staffing levels, and insufficient protection against COVID-19 in the midst of a new surge of infections.

Many striking healthcare workers see themselves as locked in a life-and-death struggle for their livelihoods, for quality health care, and for the benefit of the entire working class. But it is increasingly apparent that the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) bureaucracy—an amalgamation of bureaucrats from the SEIU, United Healthcare West and several other smaller unions—has no intention of waging a serious fight for these objectives.

The CKPU has called the strike for only three days, guaranteeing from the start that workers will return to the job prematurely without any of their demands being met. By limiting the strike, the union bureaucracy has ensured that it will have no substantial impact on the finances of Kaiser Permanente, which rakes in billions of dollars of profits annually despite its supposed “nonprofit” status. The upper levels of the company are swimming in cash, with \$113 billion in investments and with 49 Kaiser executives being paid more than \$1 million a year.

Because of Kaiser’s distinctive business model—in which its approximately 12.7 million members are locked into monthly subscription fees regardless of whether they come to the hospital for evaluation or treatment—the strike could wind up actually benefiting the company’s bottom line by saving them tens of millions of dollars of workers’ wages over the three-day period.

Kaiser is not paying striking workers during the strike, and the unions are not providing strike pay either. In a post before the strike,

for example, SEIU local 105 in Colorado informed its members that they “do not get paid for the days they are on strike,” directing striking workers to look to “churches” and “community groups” for food and “financial donations.” The union also sent workers a long list of over 40 food pantries in the state, telling workers to call in advance to make sure the pantry will be open.

While the SEIU bureaucracy tells its members to go beg elsewhere for food in the manner of Ebenezer Scrooge (absurdly calling this “solidarity”), the union collected \$240 million in dues last year, of which it spent \$63.5 million on “lobbying” and political campaigns.

The union bureaucracies claim to be negotiating with management to arrive at some kind of compromise between the union’s position and management’s position. This framework sets workers up for failure, because even the maximum demands being put forward by the union in negotiations are far below what Kaiser workers need and deserve. These demands include a 7 percent pay increase in the first two years of the contract, followed by a 6.25 percent increase in years three and four.

These maximum “increases” amount to an effective pay cut, as they are lower than the actual rate of increase in prices. As recently as August 2022, for example, the rate of inflation for food was 11.4 percent, with gas prices and rent also skyrocketing. Inflation will not stand still over the four years of the contract, either. The costly and escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, deepening political dysfunction in the US, and the still raging global pandemic will cause prices to be even more volatile in the coming years.

While the union leaderships refuse to wage a serious struggle for workers’ needs, they are cynically utilizing the struggle of rank-and-file workers as a means to promote and campaign for various Democratic Party politicians.

The Twitter/X account of SEIU-UHW, for example, representing more than 100,000 hospital and clinic workers in California, took the opportunity presented by the strike to go all-out in this regard, allowing a slew of local, state and federal politicians to use the strike to promote themselves and pose for photos with workers they assuredly never met before. In these photo ops, striking workers locked in a desperate battle against intolerable conditions were treated by the union bureaucracy as mere props, with politicians shamelessly stampeding to the picket lines for images of themselves posing with striking workers that they could post on social media.

On Thursday, the SEIU-UHW promoted no less than 20 Democratic Party politicians through its Twitter/X account, the most active of any unions in the CKPU which is no doubt managed with workers’ dues

money. By the end of the day, the account had promoted at least three politicians—California federal representatives Katie Porter, Ted Lieu, and Ro Khanna—who voted last year in Congress to force rail workers to keep working instead of striking, establishing themselves as strikebreakers and hostile adversaries of the working class.

As demonstrated by interviews with striking workers conducted by the WSWs in the period leading up to and during the strike, Kaiser workers see themselves as part of a growing working class rebellion that also includes autoworkers, teachers, rail workers, postal service workers, logistics workers, and entertainment industry workers in the US and around the world.

The conditions facing Kaiser workers require fundamental changes, not a few band-aids. Esther, who works as a Care Coordinator at Kaiser West Los Angeles, described workers literally being killed on the job in the fight against the coronavirus. “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?”

Staffing levels are at critically low levels, which will inevitably result in missed diagnoses, preventable complications, and deaths. “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,” said Marjorie, who works at Kaiser Claremont Mesa.

“Let’s combine this together, let’s combine the fight together,” Marjorie said. “It’s all about equality. And if the railroad workers want to go on strike, I will support them 100 percent because they’re the workers, they know what’s going on. They know what needs to be better. Bring it all together. It’s all about unity.”

At Kaiser, as in every other industry, the expanding working class rebellion against intolerable conditions comes up not just against the greedy intransigence of management but against the conservative, highly paid, corporatist union bureaucracies, which have no intention of waging a serious struggle and actively work to suppress and undermine any such aspirations. As evidenced by the experience of the rail workers last year, this rebellion requires a confrontation with the government itself, which is not a neutral arbiter but an instrument of class rule for the owners.

This objective dynamic makes necessary the formation of new working class organizations at the rank-and-file level—to insist on what healthcare workers require, regardless of what management or the union bureaucracies say they are willing to offer. These rank-and-file committees will be increasingly strengthened to the extent that they connect with each other and coordinate their struggles as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Numerous articles appearing in establishment newspapers in the US on Thursday attempted to counterpose the interests of patients to those of striking workers, attempting to set working class patients and striking workers against each other. This pro-management narrative was reinforced by White House spokesman Karine Jean-Pierre, who responded to a question about the strike yesterday by posturing in support of striking workers while at the same time pointing to “reports of babies not being able to get check-up appointments” and encouraging “all sides come together and in a good faith approach.”

This is nothing more than “divide and conquer,” an attempt to stir up friction between groups of workers who are natural allies of each other and who are confronting the same fundamental issues. The

conflict is not between healthcare workers and workers who need healthcare, but between needs of society and capitalist profit interests.

This conflict cannot, as a matter of fact, be solved by “good faith negotiations.” There exists no example in history where workers won pay equal to the value of their labor with this approach—a nurse might as well try to have “good faith negotiations” with a malignant cancer.

The three-day Kaiser strike reveals the immense social weight and power of healthcare workers as well as their collective will to fight for better pay and conditions. The end of the strike is not the end of this struggle, which must be reopened on a higher and more conscious level. This means taking it outside the dead-end “labor-management partnership” framework promoted by the unions, uniting with workers throughout the healthcare industry, and connecting the struggles of healthcare workers with workers engaged in parallel rebellions in every other industry.

The experience of the pandemic has demonstrated to healthcare workers in particular that public health is incompatible with the capitalist social system, in which every major public need is subordinated to the profit interests of the rich. The healthcare system in the US and worldwide, including the wages and working conditions of the millions of essential professionals, cannot be fixed until it is socialized, fully funded, and made available to all free of charge.

Healthcare workers know that serious injuries and diseases are not solved by miracles but by hard work, the application of objective scientific knowledge, and collective organization. The same approach is required when it comes to treating not an individual, but the entire sick society—which likewise does not require a miracle but the organized, intelligent, collective power of the working class, brought to bear in democratic rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the unions and all capitalist political parties, oriented to winning the healthy socialist future.



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