

The Kaiser workers' strike and the fight for socialized medicine

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6 October 2023

Join the next online meeting of the WSWs Healthcare Workers Newsletter at 2 p.m. Pacific (5 p.m. Eastern) - 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 Saturday morning, the largest healthcare workers' strike in US history will come to a temporary end. Without a tentative agreement and no concrete information about contract negotiations, workers are being told by the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) to return to work under an expired contract with nothing resolved.

Despite being limited by the union bureaucracy, the strike by 75,000 workers at the behemoth provider Kaiser Permanente was a powerful expression of the deepening radicalization of the American and international working class.

Workers everywhere are determined to fight back against decades of ever-growing inequality and poverty, which have qualitatively deepened since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The Kaiser strike coincided with the struggle of 150,000 autoworkers against the Big Three corporations, 160,000 writers and screen actors, 1,700 New Jersey nurses, and numerous other struggles on every continent.

Throughout the strike, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with Kaiser workers at facilities across California, as well as Portland, Oregon. At every picket, workers described dangerous short-staffing and poverty wages that have lagged far being the rising costs of living. The impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have been nothing less than catastrophic, with healthcare workers killed, disabled by Long COVID, and traumatized en masse due to the criminal response of the capitalist system to the worst health crisis in over a century.

Underlying the terrible conditions facing healthcare workers and their patients, including the horrific experiences during the pandemic, is the private ownership of the healthcare industry.

Despite their "non-profit" pretenses, Kaiser raked in \$3.3 billion in profits in the past six months alone, possesses an estimated \$44.5 billion in cash reserves, and has another \$113 billion held in dubious investments. Kaiser's CEO Gregory Adams garners a \$16 million salary, while 49 more Kaiser executives are paid over \$1 million a year.

Kaiser is the largest healthcare system in the state of California, setting the bar for wages and working conditions across the state and surrounding region. It is not only in the interests of Kaiser to keep wages low, but a pressure imposed by the entire industry in order to extract the maximum amount of profit.

The terrible conditions which exist at Kaiser are reflected throughout the privatized American healthcare industry, the most overpriced and dysfunctional of all advanced economies.

According to financial analysis by STAT News, hospital and healthcare CEOs have reaped enormous profits during the pandemic, with CEOs making on average \$15.3 million each in 2021 and in 2022. In 2022 alone, the profits of some 300 healthcare CEOs was a combined \$4 billion.

Such vast wealth is generated through the exploitation of the underpaid and overworked healthcare workforce, with complete disregard for patients' lives and safety.

The fundamental question arising from the Kaiser strike is who will control the healthcare industry? Will power remain in the hands of the healthcare executives who pour millions into preventing safe patient ratios, and who developed the lean staffing models that prioritize profits over workers and patients? Or will the healthcare workers take control of their workplaces, organize a broader fight for socialized medicine, and finally remove the profit motive from healthcare, guaranteeing it to all as a social and a human right?

The Kaiser workers whose labor produces billions of dollars in profits are in a powerful position to win all of their demands. However, such a fight requires a political perspective that lays out clearly who are their allies and who are their enemies.

The chief obstacle confronting Kaiser workers in their struggle is the Coalition for Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) bureaucracy, which sits as a dead weight upon the rank-and-file. The CKPU deliberately limited the strike to a three-day "unfair labor practice" strike. They denied workers their right to strike pay, the historical purpose of union dues, instead advising them to seek charity from churches and food banks.

The CKPU prides itself on their Labor Management Partnership with Kaiser, which is nothing less than a bribery scheme through which the bureaucrats can pad their pockets. But there are no shared interests between Kaiser management

and rank-and-file workers; the two are diametrically opposed.

The union bureaucracies affiliated with the CKPU are tied by a thousand threads to the Democratic party, which was on full display throughout the strike. As the WSWS explained, dozens of Democratic Party politicians were paraded at pickets and on the Twitter/X accounts of the SEIU-UHW, including California federal representatives Katie Porter, Ted Lieu, and Ro Khanna, all of whom voted to ban the rail strike last year.

The CKPU donates millions of dollars annually in workers' dues to capitalist politicians who are in bed with the healthcare giants. According to Opensecrets.org, the Office and Professional Employees Union (OPEIU) alone donated \$288,550 to Democratic party candidates in the 2022 fiscal year. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) collected \$240 million in dues last year, donating \$63.5 million to political campaigns primarily for Democrats.

As with the Republicans, the Democrats represent the interests of the financial elite, Wall Street and the corporations, including the healthcare giants such as Kaiser Permanente. The Democrats control much of state and local politics in California, which boasts some of the highest rates of poverty and social inequality in the US, as well as massive prison systems for citizens and immigrants alike.

While the union bureaucrats welcomed Democrats to the picket lines with open arms, providing them with staged photo opportunities for their upcoming 2024 election campaigns, the same bureaucrats harassed socialist WSWS reporters and sought to intimidate workers against taking our material at multiple picket lines.

At Kaiser Zion in San Diego, OPEIU Local 30 Executive Director Marianne Giordano—who nets \$212,000 a year from union dues—gave visceral expression to the anti-communist and anti-democratic sentiments which permeate the union bureaucracies. Grabbing WSWS leaflets from workers' hands, whom she referred to contemptuously as “my members” she states, “They don't have to talk to you if I tell them not to.” She then shouted, “Take your socialist shit and get out of here.”

At the Kaiser San Jose facility, union bureaucrats hectoring a WSWS reporting team who were on public property, demanding they delete media covering the strike.

Giordano and the San Jose union bureaucrats express the fear of the bureaucracy that workers will take this struggle into their own hands. They have not forgotten that the current contract was declared a “major victory” by the CKPU in 2019, despite the fact that it lacked any of workers' concrete demands to improve working conditions.

Meanwhile, conditions have only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed the greatest loss of life among healthcare workers. The World Health Organization estimated that up to 180,000 healthcare workers lost their lives from COVID-19 globally in the period between January 2020 to May 2021, with tens of thousands more likely succumbing to the disease since then.

The corporatist trade unions, politically aligned with the Democratic Party, stood by and took no measures to protect the lives of nurses or other healthcare workers during the pandemic. In fact, they have sabotaged every strike and struggle that has erupted.

Nurses and health care workers are in a powerful position to fight and win their demands, but in order to do so they must come to understand that they confront not only Kaiser, but also the trade union bureaucracies and an underlying social and political order that is subordinated to the profit interests of a corporate and financial oligarchy.

Rumors are circulating that an open ended strike could break out in the weeks ahead, but such a fight can only be sustained through full strike pay to ensure that workers can stay on the line for as long as it takes. In their actions this week, the union apparatus has made clear that it will carry out no such measures.

In order to unlock the power of healthcare workers who are fighting for each other, their patients, and the future of their industry, workers must make a sober assessment of the role of trade union bureaucracies and begin organizing independent rank-and-file committees at every hospital, controlled by and accountable to workers themselves.

These committees must make clear their non-negotiable demands, including wage increases of at least 50 percent and ongoing cost-of-living adjustment (COLA), the immediate hiring of tens of thousands more healthcare workers to ensure safe staffing, the resumption of COVID sick pay and infection control measures, and all other needs determined by the rank-and-file.

A network of rank-and-file committees comprised of nurses and other health care workers in every hospital and health care facility, and unified with other sections of workers in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will be able to coordinate a broader fight for an end to the subordination of health care to private profit. It will lay the basis for the socialist reorganization of the healthcare industry, in which workers control conditions and healthcare is provided free for all as a guaranteed social right.



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