

“I feel like the drive to profit is happening across the board”

Kaiser workers speak out as union orders a return to work with no contract

Our Reporters
7 October 2023

Join the next online meeting of the WSWS Healthcare Workers Newsletter at 2:00 p.m. Pacific (5:00 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.

Since Wednesday, 75,000 workers at the “non-profit” healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente have been on strike, fighting primarily for better staffing and wages. While the strike is set to end early Saturday morning, the struggle has by no means come to a close. Kaiser and the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) have not yet reached an agreement, and negotiations are set to continue into at least late next week. Kaiser workers are set to return to work on Monday, without a contract.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking Kaiser workers across the West Coast on Friday, after speaking with many workers on Wednesday and Thursday.

In **Los Angeles**, reporters spoke to Harry, a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) who works in internal medicine. Speaking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, he said, “Ever since the pandemic, we were thrown to the wolves basically with COVID. And we were the only ones working, mostly healthcare. Everybody else was at home, locked down. And we were on the front lines facing COVID. We were the ‘heroes’ then. Luckily, I didn’t get it at that time. But I know a lot of coworkers who did get it.”

Harry added, “Ever since COVID, everything has skyrocketed. Gas, food, groceries, rent, everything. Everything’s gone up. So actually right now we’ve got

a pay cut because everything is so expensive, but we haven’t gotten any raises. So we want to at least stay up, keep up with the inflation.”

Harry stressed that the proposed 3 percent wage increase from Kaiser “is not going to cut it.” He added, “We need at least double or more to keep up with inflation and the price of gas and everything.

“I know that in healthcare, all healthcare companies have had a big spike in profits because of COVID. And now, we just want a piece of bigger piece of the pie just to make ends meet. We don’t want to live like them in big houses and drive fancy cars. We just want to stay above water and stay afloat.”

In **San Diego**, our reporting team was harassed by OPEIU Local 30 Executive Director Marianne Giordano, who tried to prevent workers from talking to the WSWS and reading the article on the growing rift between the rank and file and the trade union bureaucracy.

Nonetheless, a number of workers were willing to speak out. An EVS (Environmental Services) worker who wished to remain anonymous told reporters, “I feel like Kaiser needs to meet that bare minimum. I’m not even really looking for a raise. We need more staffing because we have two people doing the job of three or four other people. A LOT of people quit during COVID. Maybe 10-20 percent quit!”

Caroline, an Optician with 25 years at Kaiser, spoke about burnout: “You definitely feel the burnout after all day of working. You are trying to get through patients as fast as you can, to see them as quickly as you can, but it’s like the line of people requiring help surpasses the number of people available to help them. So it’s like the line keeps growing, but there’s the same

number of us or less of us as people leave, because they are not filling those positions.

“I think it kind of shows that in many industries workers are being overworked and not feeling valued. And we’re underpaid with the inflation, with how much rents have gone up in San Diego, our wages have not gone up at all during that time frame. So it’s making it where people are having to work multiple jobs just to keep a roof over their head, feed their kids, you know, basic needs.

“I think with Kaiser, on HMO, its members who we are seeing are people who belong to our organization, and I think they see the same things we’re seeing. They see it in their wait times, they see it in the fact that when they need to book an appointment, they are having to book months out. In our department we are currently booking into December.”

At the Sunnyside Kaiser facility in **Portland**, Oregon, workers voiced a need for higher staffing to ensure quality patient care and discussed the downturn since the start of the pandemic.

Autumn, a technician in the emergency department, said, “I’ve been employed here going on 10 years. I agree that since the pandemic, things have taken a turn for the worse. Right now we are staffing the hospital mostly with agency, we are struggling even just getting full staff. We’re shorthanded all the time. We have broadcasts every day trying to get staff in, just to take care of our patients.

“It results in high burnout for the staff, lower quality care for the patients. A lot of us are doing doubles, we’ve been doing doubles for quite some time. There are some eight-hour shifts, and some are 12. So that means a 16-hour shift to make up for the lack. It’s affecting our patients.”

When asked about the money made by Kaiser executives, Autumn noted, “Kaiser’s profits are totally unfair. They’re not at the bedside, doing the backbreaking work. They make these decisions without asking our opinion. We’re not getting paid fairly, and we’re the ones doing the bedside work.

“I feel like the drive to profit is happening across the board. And we’re trying to set a standard, not just at our hospital, but other hospitals as well.”

A worker at the Center for Women’s Health who wished to remain anonymous was at the pickets at Sunnyside supporting a family member who worked for

Kaiser. He said, “We’re fighting for the same things at OHSU (Oregon Health & Science University), higher wages, to keep our health benefits, paid time off, sick leave, general wellness days. Just a better working place.

“We are so short staffed right now, it makes going to work hard some days. There’s a lot of turnover in general. We’re pretty lucky that our department doesn’t have a lot. Management needs to support us better so we can provide better care for patients.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact