

# Contract expires for over 60,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers at the end of September

**David Levine**  
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*Kaiser workers: what are you demands in the next contract? Let us know by filling out the form below. All submissions will remain anonymous.*

The current national (United States) contract of nearly 61,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente (KP) is set to expire on September 30. Covered by the contract are nurses, pharmacists, rehabilitation therapists, facility engineers, clerical staff, security officers and others. About 33,000 of these are concentrated in California. The remainder are in Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington State and scattered locations on the East Coast (including Georgia, Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C.).

KP workers, as healthcare workers everywhere, are deeply dissatisfied with their working conditions and wages. Workers are determined to fight for inflation busting raises and safe staffing ratios for themselves and their patients. In recent weeks, KP workers and AHCU members have held informational pickets throughout southern California.

KP has laid off hundreds of workers in recent years—mostly admin and IT workers, and none of them unionized. However, in October this year, it plans to lay off 41 registered nurses and one art therapist at the San Rafael Medical Center in Northern California. The nurses are CNA members. On August 21, nurses held a protest outside the facility.

Meanwhile, in California, health insurance premiums paid typically by KP members have risen by over 10 percent each year for more than 10 years. KP, officially designated a nonprofit organization, earned \$13 billion in profit last year.

KP workers are part of a broader upsurge in the working class. Public educators in cities across California and in Philadelphia have voted overwhelmingly to strike at the start of the new year. Workers are being driven into struggle by the impossible cost of living and the destruction of their democratic rights.

But in their struggle, they confront not only KP management, but a treacherous union bureaucracy. Behind both stand the Trump administration, which is establishing a dictatorship, dismantling the country's already dysfunctional for-profit public health system, and his Democratic Party enablers who have also spent years imposing austerity.

Workers must begin preparing themselves by organizing independently through rank-and-file committees prepared to take control of the struggle, override any attempt at sabotage by union

officials and unite healthcare workers across the country in defense of the right to public health.

## Lessons of 2021

The AHCU originated as a splinter from the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions (CKPU) in 2018 as the consequence of a jurisdictional dispute between the union bureaucrats. CKPU's contract expires in 2027, one means through which the bureaucrats split up the workforce to weaken their leverage. Together, the two coalitions comprise about two-thirds of the workforce.

The present contract was the result of a betrayal. In 2021, the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU) called off an indefinite strike less than 48 hours before it was to begin with the announcement of a sellout agreement.

The agreement included below-inflation wage increases and an oppressive incentive bonus made available only to nurses who do not take any sick leave. That is, it incentivizes nurses to come to work and treat patients while they themselves are sick, thereby putting patients at risk.

Workers were blindsided by the announcement of a tentative agreement. One said, "They're [i.e. union officials] saying it's a 'victory'—it's awful—and they're calling off the strike before workers have even had a chance to vote on it. They didn't ask us first. Something's going on here. I don't know what, but something's up, and the union and Kaiser are in on it."

## Corporatism at Kaiser

This year, contract negotiations between KP and AHCU began May 5. Since the outset, the AHCU has expressed its support for finding "common ground" with administrators, rather than even pretending to organize a struggle.

In recent weeks, the AHCU has announced what it calls "TAs" ("tentative agreements") on specific elements of the contract. The

AHCU has not released the specific details of these “TAs.” But its vague statements on the issue indicate they are sellouts. For example, the bureaucrats claim that the TA on staffing includes “processes that ensure staffing language is enforceable and consistently applied across KP.”

There is no reason to believe this is anything more than window dressing. At the time, a worker had told the WSWS, “My primary concerns are not even the wages but staffing. We have strong staffing language, but there is nothing that actually ensures it gets enforced by Kaiser.”

Another worker had said, “Also, the language for staffing means nothing without a way to hold the employer accountable for their part of that deal. There are no repercussions for not adhering to the staffing language.”

The only way to enforce staffing ratios, which KP and other hospitals around the country regularly flout at will, is through action by the working class. That they are not enforced is because the union bureaucrats are in bed with management and allow them to get away with anything.

The last contract refers all specific staffing issues, including all questions of staffing numbers and staff-to-patient ratios, to joint “Labor-Management Staffing Committees,” where union officials rub elbows with managers.

Another “TA” declared in the current negotiations is the creation of a joint (union and management) national “AI & Technology Taskforce.” This is another labor-management structure that further integrating the unions into company management.

The “partnership effectiveness” category refers to the functioning of the Labor-Management Partnership (LMP), a corporatist organization in which both the unions and KP collaborate. It is based on an explicit denial of any conflict of interests between workers and management.

On its website, the KP LMP boasts of being “the largest, longest-running and most comprehensive such partnership in the United States.” Since the LMP was established in 1997, major struggles have been continuously sabotaged by union officials:

- In October 2022, over 21,000 KP nurses (members of the CNA/NNU) were scheduled to strike. Again, the union called off the strike at the last minute by announcing a sell-out deal.

About 85,000 KP workers (members of the CKPU) participated in the largest healthcare strike in United States history on November 4-7, 2023. Once again, the unions called off the strike by declaring ratification of a tentative agreement under suspicious circumstances.

KP mental health workers, members of NUHW, have struck many times over recent years. Most recently, in May 2025, a strike in Southern California—the longest mental health worker strike in United States history—ended after seven months of union-imposed isolation. The union enforced an artificial division between mental health workers in Northern and Southern California and paid out no strike pay.

Through the means of the LMP, as the WSWS previously reported, the unions “collaborated in cost-cutting schemes to reduce millions in costs, including accepting wage freezes, widespread regional disparities in wages and benefits and cuts in critical supplies. Any meager increases in labor costs were more

than made up.” An independent report found that, as of August 2022, the KP LMP had produced over \$602 million of “organizational savings,” while 9 cents per hour of workers’ wages were deducted to fund the LMP.

According to the KP LMP’s tax reporting documents, in fiscal year 2023, the LMP trust reported \$23.6 million in total expenses \$23 million in revenue, and \$30 million in assets. These expenses largely consist of training programs, committee participation, and other initiatives by which union officials function as paid managers for KP. Thus, LMP is effectively a means through which corporate money flows into the pockets of the bureaucrats. Similar “joint training centers” in the auto industry were at the center of a massive corruption scandal that brought down much of the top leadership of the United Auto Workers.

To protect their jobs, ensure adequate staffing, and meet their own basic needs, as well as the basic needs of their patients, workers must break free from the union bureaucrat-imposed conditions of division and isolation.

Healthcare workers are in a position to win their demands, but a new, independent strategy is needed. Workers need structures which they genuinely control which give them the power to enforce their democratic will and override decisions by union officials which violate them. These structures, rank-and-file committees, also give workers the means to fan out to the rest of the Kaiser Permanente workers and workers across the West Coast and the country for unity and support, as part of a broader movement in defense of workers’ rights, including the right to healthcare.

At the same time, in contrast to the union bureaucrats’ deep connections to the political establishment, workers must assert complete independence from both corporate parties through these committees.

Such a committee was built in 2021. “Nobody ever asked us what we thought about this deal before calling off the strike!” it declared in its founding statement. “What’s more, we’re still working without a contract. If there was any semblance of a democratic process, our 96 percent strike vote would have been honored, and we would be on strike right now, pushing for real wage increases and real staffing guarantees!”

It continued: “If the unions had only betrayed us, it would have been bad enough. But by shutting down our fight for adequate resources for hospitals and public health, they are endangering the lives of the public, at precisely the point when a new and massive winter surge of the coronavirus pandemic is underway.”

The statement concluded: “The union ignores our demands, lies to us and tells us to accept what management is willing to give. We are a democratic organization controlled by workers ourselves, which fights to arm our coworkers with the truth and encourage them to fight until we have won all of our demands.”



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