

“Health care is a universal right”: Kaiser Permanente nurses speak out on third day of strike

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The strike by 46,000 nurses and other healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente continued through its third day Thursday, in a struggle that poses the possibility of a working class movement against inequality, exploitation and dictatorship.

The walkout, spanning California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii, has exposed the seething anger among those who kept the health system running through the pandemic and who continue to face unbearable patient loads and declining real wages. It takes place amid an escalating political crisis in the United States: Trump’s drive toward dictatorship, the militarization of society, the dismantling of vital social programs and the assault on science and truth.

This strike is not an isolated labor dispute. It is the tip of the iceberg, a harbinger of mass working-class struggles that are coming into open collision with the corporate and political establishment.

“We produce the wealth—but we can’t afford to live.”

“The last contract was right after the pandemic,” recalled Grace, an infusion nurse at the Los Angeles Medical Center. “They promised only a 10 percent raise over four years. They called us healthcare ‘heroes’—but they don’t treat us that way.”

The cost of living in California, she said, has made survival itself a daily struggle. “We make a decent income, but it’s not enough to afford our mortgages or our children’s education. Everything is rising—groceries, gas, housing—everything.”

Meanwhile, Kaiser’s executives have amassed staggering profits: “In the last year alone, they made over \$115 billion

in revenue,” she said. “Instead of meeting us halfway, they hire travel and temp workers who make even more money, while we fight for safe staffing and fair compensation.”

For Grace and countless others, the contradiction could not be clearer. “Healthcare is supposed to be about caring for people, not about profits,” she said. “Even though Kaiser says it’s ‘nonprofit,’ the reality is that it’s run like a business. Executives make millions, and none of that wealth goes back to the people who actually do the work—nurses, custodians, techs, everyone.”

“Everything in this country is plagued by capitalism,” she said. “Even our healthcare systems, which are meant to do good, are driven by what’s profitable. At the end of the day, healthcare is a business—and we, the workers, are treated as disposable.”

Grace’s voice broke when she spoke about what the strike means for her as a nurse. “It hurts all of us to be here,” she said. “I’d rather be giving the chemotherapy my pediatric patients need. I’d rather be with those families who trust us. But Kaiser doesn’t care. They only care about profit. They’ve dehumanized the workers.”

“We care about people,” she said. “We believe everyone has a right to health care, affordable and safe. But Kaiser tries to manipulate the situation—telling us that if they give us what we’re asking for, the patients will have to pay more out of pocket. The truth is, we’re the ones who generate their wealth. We are their patients, too.”

“They have a surplus of wealth. It’s not being evenly distributed. They say they reinvest it into the system—but where? Who’s making the most? It’s the workers, not the executives who make everything run.”

The issue of immigrant rights moved her deeply. “My parents are immigrants,” she said. “When I think about Trump sending agents into hospitals and clinics to kidnap people—it’s awful. We’re here to help people. We don’t care where they’re from. We’re all humans. We all deserve dignity, respect and the right to health care.”

“If we look away from someone because of the color of their skin or because they don’t have the proper paperwork, then what are we? Why are we even in this field?”

Grace also spoke about Gaza, condemning the slaughter of medical workers and civilians. “It’s awful what’s happening there,” she said. “They broke the ceasefire. The so-called peace process is a joke. It was an arrangement to begin with.”

When Trump’s reelection came up, Grace broke down in tears. “It was extremely disappointing,” she said. “He’s racist. He’s getting rid of free speech. He’s controlling the press. He’s taking away money for working people and giving it all to the military. Instead of paying nurses to save lives, that money goes to kill people.”

“It’s hard to live here when I see the injustices that happen every day,” she said.

“There’s no reason why we should worry about our mortgage,” she said. “But we can’t afford one. My grandparents came here fleeing the Korean War. They believed in America. They thought if you worked hard, you’d make it. That’s not reality anymore. I don’t even want children—it’s impossible. Everyone here feels the same way. We’re all part of the working class, and we can’t survive like this.”

Grace ended with a sharp rebuke of the union apparatus: “There was a theory among us that bureaucrats got paid off during the last contract. That’s why we only got 10 percent in four years. Some of them make \$300,000 a year? They sold their souls.”

Her distrust was echoed by another health care worker, who said: “We don’t really believe in our unions anymore. We’ve asked for help before and got nothing. Negotiations were scattered and poorly prioritized. When you talk to union reps, they just repeat the same talking points. They sound like a broken record.”

Lisa, a registered nurse at the same facility, began by outlining her grievances. “Short staffing is the biggest issue,” she said. “Patients wait weeks for appointments. Kaiser makes huge profits but won’t give us a fair raise. Inflation has gone up. We’re just asking to be compensated fairly for the work we do.”

She pointed out that Kaiser’s claim of “nonprofit” status is a fraud. “They had to bring in contracted workers during the strike who are making twice as much as us,” she said. “That proves they have the money. If this were really not-for-profit, we’d have universal health care.”

For Lisa, the issue goes far beyond her paycheck. “Health care is a universal right,” she said. “It’s not fair that some people can only get basic prescriptions like Tylenol at the emergency department. People are waiting hours at county hospitals. And now they’re cutting Medicare, Medicaid and

WIC. My grandmother depends on those benefits. She’s worked her whole life for them. Now she doesn’t know if they’ll be there tomorrow.

“We’re supposed to be the land of the free,” she said. “But we’re going backwards. People can’t afford care, can’t afford housing, can’t afford to live. We’re fighting here not just for us—but for everyone.”

“We have a lot of power.”

Lisa, also comes from immigrant parents. “Immigration is what drives this country,” she said. “My parents worked hard their whole lives. But now people are afraid to come to hospitals because of Trump’s raids. They avoid care until it’s too late. We’ll see them again only when their cancer is stage four.”

Asked what kind of political system could address these problems, Lisa didn’t hesitate. “A system where workers hold real political power,” she said. “The people in charge now are disconnected from reality. We know what we need. We know what would benefit us. We contribute the most to society. We should have the power.”

The strike is a sign that an immense social force is coming into motion. Workers are no longer content to plead for crumbs while the ruling class squanders billions on war and repression. The fight for decent wages and staffing has become inseparable from the fight against capitalism itself.

The strike at Kaiser marks a milestone in this process. To win, workers must break through the control of the union apparatus, form rank-and-file committees in every hospital and clinic, and link their fight with broader struggles of educators, auto workers and all sections of the working class.

Only through an independent, political movement of workers—aimed at reorganizing society on socialist foundations—can the right to health care, equality and human dignity be secured for all.



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