

Operating engineers at healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente to join 31,000 currently on strike

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More than 500 Kaiser Permanente operating engineers in Southern California and Kern County affiliated with the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 501 are set to begin an open-ended strike on February 23. They will join the ongoing strike of roughly 31,000 nurses and other clinicians, now entering its fifth week under UNAC/UHCP (United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals), showing the potential to broaden the strike.

Additionally, following a \$28 million settlement over Kaiser's failure to provide adequate mental health services, more than 2,400 Kaiser therapists and social workers in Northern California from the National Union of Health Care Workers (NUHCW) are holding a strike authorization vote through Saturday. Strike action would take place in late March.

The impending strike also will take place only days after 1,100 skilled trades workers across the California State University system carried out a four-day walkout, highlighting the growing militancy among infrastructure and maintenance staff whose labor is indispensable yet often overlooked.

The engineers slated to strike operate and repair high-pressure boilers, complex electrical grids, massive HVAC systems and *life-safety plumbing networks*. Their work ensures sterile environments, uninterrupted power for life-support equipment and safe temperature regulation for pharmaceuticals and surgical suites. Without them, hospital operations cannot function.

Operating engineers identify chronic understaffing as a central grievance. Kaiser's proposal to "float" engineers between facilities is widely viewed as an attempt to institutionalize shortages while cutting labor costs. Workers warn that the constant shuffling of specialized staff would heighten the risk of system failures, threatening both worker safety and patient care.

Additional disputes include Kaiser's push for concessions

on retirement benefits, particularly changes to the "Plan B" pension, reductions in healthcare coverage for new hires and the expansion of two-tier wage structures that pay younger workers less for the same work.

Wage increase demands are the same as the UNAC/UHCP. Both IUOE Locals 1 and 401 are part of the Alliance of Health Care Unions (AHCU), along with UNAC/UHCP, UFCW locals and others. The AHCU initially started joint bargaining in 2025. Kaiser paused national bargaining in December 2025, refusing to resume with UNAC/UHCP while continuing with other Alliance unions.

The planned engineers' strike unfolds amid a broader upsurge of worker resistance across California. At the University of California, nearly 48,000 graduate student employees from United Auto Workers Local 4811 have authorized a strike over inadequate pay and rising living costs. Around 35,000 educators in United Teachers Los Angeles have also voted to strike. Over 6,000 members of United Educators of San Francisco recently carried out a four-day strike before union leaders announced a tentative agreement, which falls far below teachers' demands.

The working class is emerging as a powerful social force, in which opposition to understaffing, declining real wages and the diversion of public resources toward corporate subsidies and military expenditures are intersecting with mass opposition to the growing Trump dictatorship.

The overlap of these strikes presents a serious challenge for the union bureaucracy, which has spent decades blocking strikes and disrupting workers' unity on behalf of management and the Democratic Party. The apparatus has done its best to stagger strike deadlines and actions to prevent unity, as shown by the decision to leave LA teachers on the job during the San Francisco strike and the refusal to call out the entire AHCU in support of UNAC/UHCP members.

Yet the pressure of objective conditions is driving workers

into struggle. This process increasingly brings workers into conflict not only with their employers but also with the union leadership, which, confronted with a widening strike wave, fears losing control and the emergence of independent rank-and-file organization.

For its part, the IUOE apparatus has framed the planned action primarily as an “unfair labor practice” (ULP) strike. This formulation has become a standard mechanism through which the union leadership constrains struggles. While they justify the legal ULP framework on the grounds that it protects strikers from being fired, the designation also legally limits workers from raising economic demands.

In September 2021, approximately 700 stationary and biomedical engineers in Northern California launched an open-ended strike against Kaiser concessions. The struggle was confined to the narrow objective of compelling management to resume formal negotiations. The result was a protracted dispute that ultimately failed to mobilize the wider working class and led to more concessions.

The contradiction between the militancy of rank-and-file engineers and the restrictive tactics of the union leadership is sharpened by Local 501’s own history. Engineers and related trades played a decisive role in the 1984 Las Vegas citywide strike, when 17,000 hospitality workers shut down 32 Strip resorts for 67 days. Technical staff proved impossible to replace with scab labor, contributing to significant economic losses for casino operators and demonstrating the strategic power of infrastructure workers.

This tradition was further solidified during the Frontier Hotel strike from 1991 to 1998. For more than six years, 550 workers maintained a continuous picket line, ultimately winning reinstatement, back pay and benefits.

Meanwhile, Local 501’s bureaucracy has been targeted in a series of lawsuits accusing IUOE officials of corruption and intimidation. In 2007, Local 501 Business Manager James McLaughlin uncovered embezzlement by Apprenticeship Trust head Dennis Lundy, who allegedly forged checks and charged personal expenses to union funds. When local officers pursued the matter, former IUOE President Vince Giblin reportedly threatened their lives.

Additional claims alleged kickback schemes with contractors Able and ABM, which underreported hours and diverted benefit funds. The scandal drew congressional scrutiny of former IUOE counsel Richard Griffin and included allegations that union leaders manipulated the 2010 elections to block opposition candidates and suppress internal democracy.

Today’s conflict at Kaiser represents a new chapter in that legacy. Engineers are not acting in isolation but as part of a massive healthcare workforce confronting deteriorating working conditions and the fundamental incompatibility of

medicine with the profit system. The integration of technical and clinical labor in a common struggle highlights the potential for a unified movement capable of challenging the corporate healthcare model itself.

The convergence of these struggles raises decisive strategic questions. Union bureaucrats have largely isolated disputes, negotiating separately with employers and confining conflicts within contractual or legal limits. This fragmentation benefits management and state authorities by blocking the emergence of a unified movement capable of challenging broader social priorities.

For Kaiser engineers and clinicians, the formation of independent rank-and-file committees offers a way forward. Such bodies would allow workers to coordinate across job classifications, facilities and industries, exchange information outside bureaucratic channels and advance demands rooted in shared needs rather than institutional constraints.

Their success depends on appealing directly to other workers, including educators, logistics employees and public sector staff, who confront similar conditions of understaffing and declining real wages.

As engineers join tens of thousands of striking clinicians, the potential grows for a broader movement linking healthcare with education and other sectors. The prospect of a general strike emerges as a logical outcome of these struggles. The engineers’ walkout therefore represents more than a contract dispute. It is part of an expanding confrontation between workers and a system subordinating essential services to profit.



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