

25,000 Kaiser healthcare workers carry out one-day strike in defense of mental healthcare

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19 March 2026

On Wednesday, 2,400 mental health professionals from the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) carried out a one-day strike. They were joined by 23,000 registered nurses from the California Nurses Association, who participated in a sympathy strike. The NUHW members were also supported by operating engineers under the International Union of Operating Engineers.

The well-attended picket lines showed healthcare workers are determined to fight against ongoing attacks on their working conditions and living standards.

A major demand of the strikers is strong contract language protecting workers from AI-driven layoffs.

The contract for Northern California mental health workers expired at the end of September last year. Kaiser's treatment of mental health workers has been particularly vindictive. In 2022, Northern California mental health workers struck for 10 weeks over heavy caseloads that made it essentially impossible to provide adequate care in the time allotted. Many reported working through lunch, breaks, or outside paid working hours to complete documentation or provide urgently needed care to patients, many of whom were in crisis.

Kaiser's callous indifference to mental healthcare was illustrated most bluntly in a \$28 million settlement this February with the Department of Labor over its failure to provide timely in-network care, leaving thousands without access to necessary psychiatric and addiction treatment. Kaiser made no meaningful changes to its practices as a result, instead viewing the fine simply as a cost of doing business.

The WSWS spoke with a striking Kaiser therapist, who has not been named in order to protect her identity, "There are two things that resonate most for me: [the threat to] replace us is one of the biggest things getting me out here, but additionally they also want to roll back

everything we fought for during our last strike."

"You know, every time that things in the world get scarier and more unstable, our patients start to struggle. And that shows up in very real life. So this was true back when Bush was elected, and it's true now that we have Trump in power. And some of the things we see are that suicide rates go up—lost patients.

"Very specifically, you'll see suicide rates go up like the week of an election. And so folks who are already struggling or who don't feel seen or respected or who are scared that their rights aren't protected, absolutely.

"So we see suicide rates go up, we see mental health symptoms worsen, we see fear increase, anxiety increase, depression increase, and it comes up with, I would say at least half to three quarters of all the patients that I work with who mention and speak about the stress of just the current environment and how it's affecting the mental health and the physical being and safety.

Asked if she would support a general strike, she responded, "Our rights in labor are internally connected to government policy. And so, and they affect everything else, right? I really believe what's happening to me affects you and what's happening to you affects me. And this [striking] is how I choose to be involved and to show up. And I think that the national strike is certainly something to consider."

The 2022 Northern California contract included a provision allocating workers seven hours per week to respond to patient calls and emails, write up documentation and do other essential (but non-billable) work. However, Kaiser continued to under-resource mental healthcare and has expanded use of therapy contractors instead of hiring new therapists to meet the urgent and growing need of its patients.

Kaiser's attacks on mental health workers is part of a

broader offensive against its entire workforce. Some 31,000 nurses, physical and occupational health therapists, midwives, and other healthcare workers under the United Nurses Associations of California/Union of Health Care Professionals (UNAC/UHCP) struck for nearly a month this year for safe staffing, 30 percent raises and other demands.

But the role of the union bureaucracy has been to undermine this growing movement, isolating different sections of the workforce from each other. UNAC/UHCP called off the strike at the end of February without even offering a tentative agreement, which was only announced last week. The new proposal includes 21.5 percent pay increase over four years—barely matching inflation—and more vague language around staffing.

During the 2022 strike, the NUHW bureaucracy kept mental health workers in southern California isolated on the picket line for over six months, primarily over safe staffing. Ultimately, the union bureaucrats forced through an agreement with no firm, enforceable staffing guarantees, instead settling for vague language around recruitment, retention and “improving access.”

The Northern California IUOE engineers who struck in sympathy yesterday were themselves isolated in a 90-day strike in 2021, with all other Kaiser unions ordering their workers to cross the picket line throughout the strike (excepting two one-day sympathy strikes). Ultimately, the engineers were starved into submission, returning to work without winning anything. Afterward, they continued working without a contract for over a year.

It is significant that this time around, the NUHW forced their members to remain on the job without a contract even as 31,000 of their coworkers in UNAC/UHCP were on strike. Kaiser’s healthcare unions, who collaborate openly with management through schemes like the Labor Management Partnership, have a long history of holding one-day protest strikes, often paired with campaign-style rallies addressed by Democratic Party politicians, as was the case Wednesday. Such limited strikes aim to demoralize workers who want to engage in a real fight.

United, indefinite strike action would have had a powerful impact, including by shutting down the entire Kaiser system in Northern California and encouraging other healthcare workers across the country to fight for

their own demands.

Powerful conditions exist for a broader movement in defense of quality patient care, for guaranteed safe-staffing ratios, an end to layoffs, living wages and job protections against AI.

But, such a fight can only be organized from below in opposition to the corporatist trade union bureaucracies, which are tied hand and foot to the Democratic Party and collaborate with management with varying degrees of openness.

Kaiser mental health workers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of all trade union bureaucracies and the Democratic Party, to take the struggle into their own hands, link up with workers across the Kaiser system and healthcare workers across the country.

We call on all workers who agree with this perspective to reach out to the WSWs today and begin forming rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)