

2,400 mental healthcare workers begin strike at Kaiser Permanente

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On Monday, three weeks after their contract expired, 2,400 mental health workers of the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) began a strike against the multi-billion dollar healthcare chain Kaiser Permanente in Southern California.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several mental healthcare workers who were picketing at the Anaheim Kaiser Permanente, in the Los Angeles area.

One mental health worker said, “I think we’re still obstructed from advocating for our patients to be able to get adequate services.

“There’s also the issue of time. More appropriately, the length of time. A lot of times we can’t see our patients for weeks at a time, so their needs are not being met, and there’s a lot of misunderstandings.”

A social worker who works in oncology said, “When patients are dealing with cancer, they themselves are trying to cope with their illness. We also work with their families, their financial issues, work issues. Everything else that comes with it.”

A mental health social worker said, “The turnover rate is a little high. People suffer from burnout. So staffing tends to be an issue. It could also be an issue of just corporate greed and whatnot, but that being said, there are definitely working conditions that could be better. Turnover rate in every sector of mental health always has a high turnover rate. You get burnt out.”

A mental health therapist said, “I’ve been at Kaiser since 1998, and I’ve been doing this type of work for over 28 years. There is a toll on us, but I think it’s just about not having good work-life balance, not having enough staff to do the job that we need to do, not having enough time in our schedule to just do patient follow-up. A lot of what we do isn’t just seeing patients and we don’t get time for it.

“And then there were five years where our union got no cost of living or pay increase. What our union is asking for is pretty similar to what other unions already have. It’s not really extraordinary. If you look at the Northern California Kaiser mental health workers that are associated with us, they are a separate entity. They have everything that we’re asking for and more. Like pensions, we don’t have pensions.

“If you look at the nurses’ union or the pharmacists’ union, they have pretty much what we’re asking for. So it’s not like the union’s asking for anything crazy. That’s why they’re saying the inequity part. It’s just our union isn’t getting the same consideration as others.”

While workers are determined to win better conditions for patients and themselves, the NUHW has limited the strike to only a few select days and locations while negotiations with Kaiser continue. Monday’s strike involved NUHW members from Fontana, Los Angeles, Anaheim and San Diego, while members from Lancaster, Downey, Bakersfield, Riverside and Panorama City will picket later in the week.

The strike by mental health workers also began the day after the end of a limited six-day strike called by the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW) for dialysis workers. This was a conscious decision to isolate different sections of workers from each other.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 324 also decided to cancel a strike at seven CVS pharmacy locations and send workers back to work without a contract, preventing a unified fight of healthcare workers against abysmal conditions.

By refusing to initiate an all-out strike, the NUHW officials are ensuring that the membership cannot wage

a genuine fight against their deplorable working conditions and that the profit-making operations at Kaiser remain unhampered.

The NUHW has also limited the demands of the rank and file, declaring in an October 18 press release that Monday's strike is aimed at "demanding" that Kaiser increase patient care time, provide fair pay and restore pensions for their mental health care workers.

In the same press release, the NUHW describes their acceptance of a "two-tiered mental health system" at Kaiser in which NUHW members in Northern California have a pension while members in Southern California have gone without a pension for over a decade.

There is no demand from the union whatsoever to ensure adequate and safe staff-to-patient ratios or any additional safeguards against continuous waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to wreak havoc on healthcare systems world wide.

Absent from the paltry economic demands, politely asked for by the union bureaucrats, is any appeal to wage a political battle against the Democratic Party and their pro-corporate policies which have rapidly deteriorated California's public healthcare system.

The NUHW has a long history of supporting the pro-corporate and pro-war Democratic Party, which has placed all costs for their imperialist wars onto the backs of the entire working class, healthcare workers included.

This was made evident when the Democratic Party discontinued federal and state pandemic assistance by purging millions of impoverished workers from Medicaid rosters. Freeing up billions of dollars in order to wage war against Russia, China and Iran abroad.

While the NUHW bureaucracy promotes the lie that the Democratic Party is a trustworthy ally to healthcare workers, the Democratic Party has been instrumental in aiding Israel with its genocidal rampage against defenseless Palestinians, where hospitals are routinely targeted and medical personnel are routinely killed.

The NUHW's endorsement of the Democratic Presidential Candidate Kamala Harris for President should be a clear indication that the NUHW will assist Harris in securing the home front in preparation for war.

There is a willingness to wage a coordinated fight among healthcare workers and other key sections of the

working class, such as Boeing workers who are currently on strike pending their contract vote, but this will not, and can not, come from the bureaucrats inside of the NUHW.

What workers need is a new strategy and approach that will be used to wage a genuine fight against the multi-billion dollar healthcare companies and their pro-corporate stooges in Washington.



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