

California: Kaiser Permanente mental health workers set to strike

By Julio Patron
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Over 1,400 mental health psychologists, therapists and other clinicians working at Kaiser Permanente in Northern California were set to strike on Monday. The workers, organized by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), cite Kaiser's inadequate staffing, which has been going on for years, as well as unsafe working conditions and environments for patients, and call for an end to retaliation by Kaiser against whistleblowers.

The NUHW asked workers to start the "open ended" strike on Monday, claiming they will strike "as long as it takes" for their demands to be met. This is one in a long line of strikes and walkouts initiated by the NUHW and other medical workers unions in recent years.

While the NUHW has called for an open-ended strike action against Kaiser, there can be little doubt the result will be inadequate. In total, these mental health workers have been working without a contract for more than four years, and this would be the second strike called by the NUHW this year, with the first a set of "rolling pickets" in January.

The current strike will follow the same pattern, where workers at individual Kaiser facilities will strike on different days and return to work almost immediately. This is designed to ensure minimal disruption to Kaiser profits. Kaiser said following the NUHW's notice of the strike action that their facilities will remain open during the strikes, bringing in other medical professionals to fill their places.

While the mental health workers have been working without a contract, the NUHW's parent organization, the California Nurses Association (CNA), has struck deals for other sections of Kaiser workers. This includes a new three-year contract for 18,000 registered nurses last January that was agreed in the middle of the

NUHW workers' last strike in order to isolate and demoralize them.

Despite the efforts of their union to keep them isolated, health care workers at Kaiser are opposed to a sellout contract that ignores deteriorating work conditions and low wages.

In June 2013, the California Department of Managed Health Care (DMHC) levied a \$4 million fine against Kaiser for its untimely treatment of patients, who have had to wait months at a time to be treated due to the understaffing of clinicians. Kaiser fought the penalty until finally paying up in full on August 2014, but has done nothing to correct the underlying issues. This has led to a number of cases that have had fatal consequences for workers and patients alike, with a number of patients committing suicide because of Kaiser's untimely care. Workers have had to face unsafe and unsanitary working conditions, with hazardous waste piling up due to their understaffing at some facilities.

Former Kaiser employees have started blowing the whistle on the "non-profit" for working conditions and its move to fire clinicians en masse, specifically targeting part-time clinicians and working parents with strict attendance policies. Clinicians are only allowed two absences a year, while any more absences resulted in "corrective action," i.e., discipline up to and including termination. This was followed by a new policy that forced managers to call their employees back at their home phone; if they didn't answer the sick day would be considered fraudulent, according to the *Lund Report*.

Since the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been implemented, which requires all US residents to obtain medical insurance or pay a penalty, there has been a dramatic influx of new patients, with 422,000 more in

the first nine months of this year alone. In spite of this, Kaiser has refused to hire an adequate number of staff, resulting in chronic mistreatment of patients and an overload for workers, who cover multiple shifts in order to keep up with the demand. Keeping a minimal amount of employees on the one hand, while withholding essential services to its patients on the other, has resulted in record profits for Kaiser Permanente. Profits in the third quarter of this year stood at \$997 million, 57 percent higher than the same period last year.

The NUHW and the CNA refuse to wage an actual struggle against these conditions because they support the Democratic Party and accept, without question, the domination of the health care system by corporate and financial interests. Sal Rosselli, NUHW president, has been a consistent Obama booster, even after the disastrous impact of the ACA on patients became clear. Now he and the NUHW are endorsing “democratic socialist” presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, calling him “the real thing.” It is clear, however, that Sanders, whose “socialism” is based on nationalism and support for corporate profits, supports the attack on health care carried out under the ACA.

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