

Over 4,000 Kaiser Permanente mental health workers on limited strike in California

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More than 4,000 mental health care workers went on strike this week at more than 100 Kaiser Permanente hospitals and facilities in California. Workers are demanding higher wages and increased staffing and want to end the two-tier health care and pension system imposed by the giant healthcare chain and accepted by the union three years ago.

The National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) is calling off the strike on Saturday without resolving any of the workers' demands.

Kaiser Permanente is the largest healthcare organization in the United States, with dozens of locations in California and several more throughout the country. The not-for-profit company had an operating revenue of \$72.7 billion last year. The Oakland-based company's CEO Bernard James Tyson Sr. pocketed over \$10 million in compensation last year.

Despite a net income of \$3.6 billion last year, the company has not used these funds to seriously address any of the issues, which have driven 3,600 therapists and 400 support staff to go on strike. The action is a clear indication that healthcare workers are prepared to wage a serious fight to defend their livelihoods and provide the necessary care for their patients.

However, the NUHW has a history of conducting limited one day strikes involving only certain sections of the hospital workers before agreeing to a concessions deal with the employers. In 2011, the NUHW and the California Nurses Association (CNA) staged a one-day strike involving 23,000 nurses.

This was followed by another one-day strike in 2012 at facilities owned by Sutter Health, with another two-day strike three weeks later. A strike was held in 2013 by the CNA for 3,100 nurses and staff at Sutter Health hospitals, followed a year later by a strike at a San Bernardino hospital.

In January 2015, the CNA reached a deal with Kaiser covering 18,000 nurses. The deal increased salaries by 14 percent over three years, but this was offset by decreases in pensions and benefits, and the salary increase did not apply to 2,600 mental health workers organized by the NUHW, who were striking at the same time as the CNA made a deal.

Declining patient care and workers' grievances led state regulators to fine Kaiser Permanente \$4 million in 2013 over delayed access to health care for patients, in violation of the state's Mental Health Parity Act. The state agency issued a follow-up report outlining continued problems.

Healthcare workers note that many Kaiser patients have to wait a month or more for return appointments. One in three patients in southern California are sent out of Kaiser for therapy, often pocketing the cost themselves. These delays can be lethal, as many patients suffer from debilitating mental illnesses.

The strike comes at a time when mental health issues are plaguing the American working class. According to a report from Blue Cross Blue Shield, major depression has risen 33 percent since 2013 just among those who are commercially insured. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) also released a report last week documenting that the suicide rate has increased by 33 percent since 1999.

Despite the growing demand for mental health professionals, a 2016 report by the Health Resources and Services Administration said that by 2025, there would be a shortage of more than 10,000 full-time employees who provide for mental health and substance abuse.

Already, 77 percent of US counties experience "severe shortages" of psychiatrists and other health providers, according to a 2017 report by the National

Council for Behavioral Health.

Striking workers at a Kaiser Permanente facility in Irvine, 40 miles south of Los Angeles, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues in their struggle.

Jonathan, who has worked as a psychotherapist for Kaiser for 22 years, said, “There’s been a decided effort to decentralize or break up broad union contracts. Today there are far less workers in the unions, while at the same time the disparity between the wealthy and poor is getting greater and greater. I’m sure the CEO of Kaiser is making an unbelievable amount.

“Most physicians are making 25 percent more, and they’ve been able to keep up with inflation. But we are making only 15 percent more. With inflation up 16 percent, we’re slowly falling backwards. My co-pay went from \$5 to \$20. That’s an enormous jump.

“We used to be part of a big coalition of unions representing 80 percent of all Kaiser employees. Then from 2008 to 2010, we were taken over by Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Instead of talking about our disagreements, they basically took over our union and summarily removed us from our posts. So, we voted them out and then joined the NUHW.

“Kaiser has been trying to take advantage of that. We’re fighting the very same issues that we were fighting for in 2012-15. It has never changed. We want a decent raise and staffing. Today in 2018, I now have one percent less earning power than in 2010. Inflation is moving ahead, and this year Kaiser’s offering 1.5 percent. It’s ridiculous!

“And we don’t have enough people to take care of our patients. It’s not even therapy if you can’t see someone in one to two months.

“Right now, the psychiatric patients are being seen by management and scabs, some of whom came in from out of state. Are they licensed for California? I know for sure that Kaiser is paying them \$6,000 a week, putting them up in hotels, providing lunch, and immediate access to patients’ charts. Usually it takes two months to be certified. They did it in a day.

“We figured that Kaiser is spending about \$10 million this week. They could be using that money to meet our demands. As it is, right now we have to ship 30 percent of our work to outside providers because we have so many patients. We have 500,000 patients in

Orange County. That’s a lot in a county of three million.

“And Kaiser says we’re greedy. All we want is equal pay. They got rid of pensions for new hires.”

Jennifer Harber is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and registered play therapist (RPT). She wore a sign that read, “Kiddos need weekly therapy, NOT monthly!” She’s been working at Kaiser for 12 years but has 24 years’ experience. “I work with children from two to 18 years old. I should be seeing them on a standard weekly basis. We’ve been seeing them every four to seven weeks. They don’t even remember us. It’s unethical.

“Three years ago, we lost the fight against Kaiser’s two-tier pension system. As a result, new hires don’t get a pension. We want that back. They should have a pension, just like everyone else.”

Jade Rosado is also a LCSW but has only been with Kaiser for six months. Prior, she worked 10 years in the field for nonprofits and community agencies. “I’m a mental health therapist, and I work with all ages, from children to older adults. Yes, I’m one of the newly hired who doesn’t get a pension. That’s not right.”

Vicki Hoskins, a licensed marriage and family therapist, has almost 20 years’ experience and has been with Kaiser for 14 years. “I work with adults and couples. Some of them have depression, anxiety and relationship issues. I’m averaging visits with them every six to eight weeks. We need to see our patients more often. Four sessions a year isn’t going to cut it. That’s why we need more staffing.

“Kaiser keeps adding members, signing up with more and more medical programs. That is how they make their money. But we have so many patients and we have to outsource. But that’s why they were fined five years ago by the Department of Mental Health for \$4 million for untimely access. They add more patients without adding staff. Their solution is for us to work harder.”

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