

Strike date of October 14 set for 80,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers across US

By Kevin Martinez
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A strike date of October 14 has been set for more than 80,000 Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers in six states. Workers in California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Maryland and Virginia, as well as Washington DC will be on strike in less than four weeks if negotiations between the hospital giant and the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions fail to produce a tentative contract.

The walkout would be the largest strike in the US since 1997, when 185,000 members of the Teamsters union struck against United Parcel Service and follow on the heels of the strike by 46,000 GM autoworkers, which began at midnight Sunday.

Not all union members represented by the Kaiser Coalition have yet voted to strike, but given the widespread support for a walkout, this is expected to change. Some 60,000 of the total 80,000 Kaiser workers, mainly non-clinical staff, have already voted to authorize a strike, with the rest of the membership completing voting next month.

While negotiations between the hospital chain and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) are set for this week, there has been no concrete information given out regarding the content or progress of talks or even if workers will receive strike pay if they walk out on October 14.

Little has been said about what workers can expect in the latest negotiations. The SEIU is hoping to collaborate with Kaiser in order to extract concessions not for the membership, but for the union bureaucracy. The Coalition is threatening a strike in order to achieve this, while the Alliance of Health Care Unions, a split-off of the SEIU-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW), hopes to actively collaborate with

Kaiser as part of a “Labor Management Partnership.”

Meanwhile, workers at Kaiser, who have been without a contract for almost a year, are demanding better staffing and patient care in addition to improved working conditions. While Kaiser Permanente is officially a non-profit, the company has geared more toward corporate profits, especially in the wake of the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACT), or Obamacare.

Kaiser has proposed an across-the-board wage increase of 3 percent each year until 2022. Sean Wherley, a spokesman for the Coalition, did not say what type of increases the unions were seeking.

The potential strike by Kaiser workers is part of a broader upsurge in the class struggle in the US and internationally, which have been repressed by the trade unions for over four decades. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) the number of strikes in 2018 was the highest since 2007 and the total number of workers on strike was the highest since 1986.

Last year, strikes in the healthcare and education fields accounted for nearly all strikes. This included workers at University of California Medical Centers, University of Vermont Medical Center, Rhode Island and Hasbro Children’s Hospital as well as Kaiser Permanente.

Workers at Kaiser have experienced 18 strikes since 1993, the most of any healthcare organization since the BLS began recording statistics the same year. More than 4,000 Kaiser mental health care workers at 100 hospitals and facilities struck last December for five days when the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) called a picket over staffing and other issues.

The Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions has

already announced that the planned strike for next month will last only seven days and has laid out four demands, including “a true-worker management partnership,” “safe staffing,” a plan to “build the workforce,” in addition to wages and benefits.

The Kaiser chain has been accused of raising rates on patients and not treating patients with low incomes while handing out exorbitant salaries to top executives, including the \$16 million annual salary of CEO Bernard J. Tyson.

Kaiser has also been accused of “patient dumping,” whereby severely mentally-ill patients were illegally shifted from its commercial plans to public providers like Medicaid. The company was forced last December to pay a \$1.2 million settlement to families for “unlawful practices” which “serve to shift the cost of treatment for mental illness away from Kaiser and onto public taxpayers, enabling the company to ‘socialize its losses while retaining its revenue—which includes years of premium payments,’ according to the complaint.

The company has increasingly ditched its non-profit pretenses to collect a net income of \$2.3 billion over the last two years, while still not paying income taxes or any property taxes. Moreover, the company has outsourced jobs to companies that pay less and offer fewer benefits.

The mental health care workers employed by Kaiser in California are involved in a separate contract dispute. While the NUHW rejected Kaiser’s latest offer, last July it called off a strike that was planned for June, after state politicians stepped in to demand further negotiations.

The impact of Obamacare has led to significant cost cutting and increasing exploitation of healthcare workers, rewarding hospital administrators for lowering admission rates and for “value-based care,” code for taking on more patients and squeezing more out of already overworked health care workers. This has been most glaringly reflected in the epidemic of nurse suicides.

As the American population gets older, more and more patients with untreated illnesses have entered the health systems, overwhelming understaffed hospitals and facilities. Emergency room visits have increased while healthcare has shifted away from public hospitals to more profitable “outpatient” services. The result is

inpatient nurses working harder with fewer resources.

Healthcare workers should place no confidence in the SEIU-led coalition to wage a serious struggle in their interests. The rotten union leaderships are actively collaborating with management to achieve perks for themselves while selling out the workers and enforcing concessions.

Kaiser Permanente workers should form rank-and-file committees and link up with workers across the healthcare industry, regardless of union affiliation and contract status, while fighting for universal healthcare based on social need not private profit.

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