

US: Strike of 85,000 Kaiser Permanente workers called off by unions

By Kevin Martinez
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Hospital giant Kaiser Permanente announced on Wednesday that a tentative deal had been reached with a coalition of its unions, calling off a scheduled strike by more than 80,000 workers, including 67,000 in California.

The strike was called off unilaterally by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) without any input from the workers. The agreement comes only two weeks before a strike date of October 14 after a near unanimous vote of workers authorizing action.

The tentative deal hatched by the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions, whose largest union is the SEIU, comes amid a strike by 48,000 workers at General Motors that began September 17. The United Auto Workers has been conspiring with the giant automaker to shut the strike down, while keeping the UAW membership in the dark about the progress of negotiations.

A Kaiser Permanente strike would be the largest strike in the US since the strike of 185,000 Teamsters against the United Parcel Service in 1997. The Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions clearly fears that a strike by its 80,000 workers, emboldened by the GM strike, could easily spiral out of control.

Workers at Kaiser have been toiling without a contract for almost a year, the last one expiring September 30, 2018. Workers should not allow their strike action to be called off when they are in a powerful position to rally support for their struggle from other workers and the patients who seek quality, affordable patient care.

Kaiser Permanente is comprised of 39 hospitals and serves more than 12 million people. Workers are in a coalition of more than 12 local affiliates of the SEIU, Office and Professional Employees International Union and International Federation of Professional and

Technical Engineers. Workers include emergency medical technicians, nurses, respiratory therapists, biomedical technicians, medical billers, transcriptionists, receptionists, janitors and other staffers.

In calling off the strike, the SEIU and the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions have essentially abandoned mental health workers who are still in negotiations with the company and were also hoping to strike.

The four-year contract agreement would pay members of the union in the Kaiser coalition annual pay increases, including 3 percent a year for workers in California. Such increases do not cover the rising cost of inflation and have not been specified for other states.

In the former Group Health Cooperative—the Washington division of the hospital chain recently acquired by Kaiser—the increases would be 2 percent in the 2nd through 4th years for these employees and similarly for union members in Colorado, Hawaii and the Mid-Atlantic region. The agreement also includes a 1 percent lump-sum payment that could be increased only if certain financial benchmarks are met.

The tentative agreement also includes an additional \$250 for tuition-related expenses, raising the total to \$750, and saves employees a negligible amount through the use of a mail-order pharmacy program.

The proposed pact, far from hiring more nurses and staff to help with the increasing number of patients as was originally demanded by workers, instead agrees to a “Workforce Development Fund” which would ostensibly provide education for California workers to get new jobs.

The \$130 million in funding for the program is “one-of-a-kind, not just the amount of being spent, but also the commitment to fill those vacancies in California through training, recruitment and

placement,” according to Sean Wherley, a spokesman for SEIU-UHW, which represents 57,000 Kaiser workers. The multimillion-dollar fund in all likelihood will constitute a new slush fund for the unions in exchange for maintaining labor peace.

While the details of the new program have yet to be released, it is also part and parcel of Kaiser’s efforts to use new technologies to ration healthcare and increase profits. The union and the company both predict future nurse and staff shortages and intend to use the fund to develop remote medical techniques over traditional in-person care.

Emerging technologies, drug development and a better scientific understanding of diet and nutrition have made chronic illness prevention a real possibility. However, under capitalism these advances are not put to use to improve health. Rather, with profit as the driving factor, the well-being of the population is subordinated to the profit motive of the hospital chains, insurance companies and pharmaceuticals, and the incidence of chronic illnesses continues to soar.

The unions and Kaiser have agreed to limited concessions on the question of outsourcing. The tentative contract bans outsourcing only for certain jobs, including revenue collection, call centers, pharmacy, laboratory and housekeeping, and only for the life of the contract, meaning after four years these jobs can be axed.

As for the hundreds of jobs that have already been outsourced in California alone, Wherley told the media that they would not be brought back retroactively. Outsourcing is one of the ways Kaiser has been able to pay their workers less with fewer benefits while maintaining \$80 billion in revenue every year. Defined benefit pensions have already been eroded into a 401k-style hybrid retirement plan.

The tentative agreement will also set up a “committee” to ensure personal face-to-face interaction between nurses and patients is not affected. The reality is that this non-binding committee will do nothing to safeguard the working conditions of nurses and the compassionate care of patients.

The Affordable Care Act, signed into law under the Obama administration, has contributed to the ongoing attack on healthcare workers by increasing patient loads, while providers like Kaiser Permanente strive to cut costs for hospitals and other providers.

Workers should have no confidence whatsoever in a contract they are not even allowed to see. By calling off the strike when workers are in a powerful position to fight, the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions have shown they are interested in protecting the interests of the company, not the workers.

Workers should form rank-and-file committees and take control of their struggle out of the hands of the unions. The terms of the contract must immediately be made available to all workers and a vote on the contract organized, with the aim of calling a strike if the demands of workers are not fully met.

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