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## RANK AND FILE VIEW OF THE KAISER STRIKE

(Editor's note: LCR interviewed Blanch Bebb, SEIU Shop Steward at Kaiser in San Francisco, who wished to comment further on our earlier report on the Kaiser Strike, LCR 208, March 1987. This interview will be concluded in the August issue of LCR.)

**LCR:** In your view, what was the significance of the recent Kaiser strike?

**Blanche:** I think the members understood the significance of two-tier much better than any union leader. We weren't prepared and we lost the strike. But in a lot of ways we didn't lose because the members did come to understand the two-tier issue as part of the fight for justice -- as a fight for equal pay for equal work. We were told there was no more strike pay before we decided to reject the contract, after seven weeks. We were cut off from benefits, yet people were willing to stay out and fight because it was a cause.

We have also put a nail in the coffin of two-tier. Kaiser wanted two-tier in Los Angeles, and they ended up backing off of it. Alta Bates Hospital and Herrick in Berkeley had asked for two-tier and they backed off. Children's Hospital also is going to settle without two-tier. I think it was because of our fight that these hospitals decided to lay low on this issue. On our picket line we didn't stop two-tier, but I think we did slow down its momentum. This strike gave us the chance to fight for something we believe in; how often do people get that choice?

It has been suggested that the union should have delayed going out on strike until they were fully prepared to take a strike; that perhaps they could have utilized in-plant strategies before going out on strike.

Had we delayed the strike, more people would have been fired. While we were in negotiations, two people were fired for disruption at the Sacramento Kaiser. I'm not sure what they did, but they took these kinds of on-the-job actions. Had we done it on a wide scale, thousands would have been fired. In addition, our membership has always said, "No way, we're not going to work without a contract; if we're going to go out, we're going to go out."

Plus it's dangerous to delay the contract. It was an idea that came from one of these International people, just before we went on strike. We had this big leadership meeting and the International representative wanted us to work a couple of days, strike a couple of days, go in and out -- and we said, "My God -- maybe you can do it if you're a school teacher or something but this would be a disaster; our people would tear that place apart, we'd all be fired!" But this idea can only come from someone who's never worked in a hospital and therefore does not understand the situation.

**What about very subtle things, such as a slow down?**

We couldn't hold back -- tell people, "Well, our contract is up." We find it's very hard, because we care and that's what Kaiser counts on, we don't want to provide poor care to patients. I'm an X-ray technician -- I don't want a patient to sit there any longer than necessary. The patients we get are very sick or they wouldn't be hospitalized. That is our weakness, our feeling for the patient, but it's also our strength, because that's why we did get support from the patients.

**Since Kaiser has negotiated in good faith in the past, were there any indications prior to the strike about their new anti-labor attitude?**

We got a clue. During negotiations, Ken Dale, the chief negotiator for Kaiser, said, "Well your employees are incidental to patient care." Now, how's that for an insult?

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In fact, the whole situation was different. Prior to 1979, we would go in and negotiate and come out with some improvement somewhere, not everything we wanted but a little improvement. When we struck in '68 and in '72, we struck to improve things, not to hold back the take-aways. In fact the '68 strike was in large part about having the same wages in the Sacramento clinics that we had in the B. Area. So we were re-fighting that same fight that was so important even in '68.

By 1979 Kaiser would come in and I thought we'd negotiate, just like in the past, and we said, "This is what we want," and they said, "We'll give you nothing!" And in 1979 we didn't lose very much but we didn't gain anything.

In '81 it was horrible take-aways, very bad for morale. And every time we would go to negotiations, they would have these charts; the chart this year was about too much time off -- that upset a lot of people, because as hard as we work we value our time more than money.

**Given the previous negotiations, why wasn't the union more prepared this time?**

Because of the political debate within the union, with a rank-and-file caucus, The Committee for a Democratic Union (CDU). The leadership was far more concerned about that, than about preparing for Kaiser. What hurt us in negotiations was the fact that the union had already agreed to two-tiers at Stockton Kaiser, and even a third tier with cuts in benefits in Fresno, where the contract hadn't even been opened. This was in addition to the fight the union had with two-tier in the San Francisco-affiliated hospital negotiations.

All of that alerted the International to the possibility of a major disaster, not only for the union but also for the local leadership that the International had supported all those years. If we really got a bad contract there would be absolutely no hope for the leadership. And there was nobody else that the International was willing to support, so that really is what brought them in.

**What is the status of the local now?**

The International has taken over. We're in trusteeship because of the internal problems that surfaced during the strike. I think whoever is there now will have to recognize that it just doesn't pay to have the members so uneducated. You can't run it without the members involved, you'll get absolutely nowhere, and in the end people will say, "What the hell do we want a union for?" A lot of people are saying that right now.

I think our readers would be interested in knowing more about the internal problems, because they obviously influenced the conduct and the outcome of the strike. But your comments on that subject will have to wait for our issues next month.

*-- Lupe Friez*

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