

Royal College of Nursing backs British health service cuts

Ajanta Silva
9 August 2010

The open support being offered by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to the Conservative Party/Liberal Democrat government's budget cuts in the National Health Service (NHS) underscores the role of the trade unions as defenders of the profit system.

The RCN, a professional and trade union body of 400,000 nurses and health care assistants in the UK, has started a campaign called "Front Line First". Its purpose is to disarm the rank and file and lay down the necessary steps for the coalition government to impose £20 billion of cuts in the NHS over four years in England and billions more in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These cuts account for one-fifth of the total NHS budget and will be made in the guise of "efficiency savings". Tens of thousands of NHS jobs are at stake and patient care will be in great danger.

The RCN accepts the government's plans and is finding ways to support and collaborate with the government in imposing them.

Dr. Peter Carter, chief executive and general secretary of the RCN, has written to members as part of the campaign. He wrote, "It's no secret that the NHS needs to save billions of pounds across all four countries of the UK, including at least £20 billion in England alone by 2014—that's one fifth of its entire annual budget".

Stressing that these cuts are inevitable, he said, "We want to make sure these savings are achieved in the best possible way—so they don't affect patient care. Currently we've identified almost 10,000 NHS jobs that have already been earmarked for cuts, and more could be on the way. That could severely impact our ability to care for our patients".

"We're also aiming to identify waste and innovation in the NHS", Carter added. "That way, we can find

potential savings and efficiency improvements that would reduce the need for cuts, preserve nursing jobs, and increase the quality of patient care".

Geraldine Cunningham, RCN head of learning and development, declared, "When the government has confirmed that large efficiencies need to be made, it will be down to us to show where money can be saved and spending protected".

The RCN calls on its members to report stories about waste in their workplaces, short staffing, downgrading, recruitment freezes, service closures and nursing-led innovations where services have been improved and waste reduced. They have also formed a website to launch this campaign.

It is a big lie that budget cuts to public health are unavoidable. The previous Labour Party government provided some £1 trillion—enough to fund the NHS for 10 years—to bail out the banks and the financial elite. Now the working class is forced to bear the brunt in austerity measures to pay for this, including massive cuts to public spending.

Although the RCN tries to fool its members into looking here and there to report waste and seek out innovations, this will do nothing to protect nursing jobs considering the mammoth scale of the so-called "efficiency savings". Nor will it prevent the curtailment of patient care, but will only pave the way for further inroads into services. The government has already indicated what is to come. Health Secretary Andrew Lansley has said that he wants to see major efficiencies in the NHS.

Government departments have received three weeks' notice to submit plans of how their budgets would be slashed by up to 40 percent over four years. Only the health and international development departments have not been asked to impose cuts, but they will be made in

the guise of “efficiency savings”.

The trade union leaders do not have the slightest concern about job losses and the terrible consequences of spending cuts in health care. Rather they are concerned with preventing the development of an oppositional movement against the government attacks.

The human cost of budget cuts in the NHS will be enormous. A study into the potential impact of spending cuts on public health, headed by Oxford University epidemiologist David Stuckler, has warned that planned cuts to welfare programmes “will severely impact people’s health” and will result in up to 38,000 additional deaths over the next decade.

Nursing staff in the NHS are already experiencing recruitment freezes, restructuring, the loss of specialties and specialist posts, threats of being downgraded or even redundancy. Thousands of job losses of nurses and other care workers in the NHS will aggravate the already festering workloads and severe exploitive conditions of the nurses and care assistants.

Last year, a survey of 9,000 RCN members found that 42 percent of NHS nurses feel that short-staffing compromises patient care at least once or twice per week with one in four saying care is compromised on most or every shift.

The impact of the budget restraints and “efficiency savings” are already beginning to appear in NHS Trusts and health boards throughout the UK.

The Scottish governments’ workforce projections for all of Scotland’s health boards published last month showed an anticipated loss of 1,523 nursing and midwifery posts across the country in 2010-11. Scottish health boards are attempting to save at least £250 million this year.

Northern Ireland health and social care services face £700 million in “efficiency savings” cuts by March 2011 from a current annual budget of 3.6 billion. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already imposed a 2 percent cut in the overall pay bill during 2010-2011. Around 1,300 health jobs, including 500 nursing posts, will be eliminated as a result.

These massive cuts to nursing posts are taking place while some assessments suggest vacancy rates of up to 16 percent are operating in some areas in Northern Ireland. Related cuts in Wales will eliminate more than 2,000 nursing posts by 2013.

Like other trade unions, the RCN does whatever it can to support and defend the profit system. Before the May general election it launched a campaign to lobby party conferences and the candidates of the major parties to sow illusions that putting pressure on politicians would help improve the future of nursing and the health system. The RCN’s mantra at the time was “With 1,800 members of the nursing family living in each constituency, our message to politicians is a simple one—nursing counts”. Now the government is counting nursing posts in their thousands in order to eliminate them.

The RCN leaders were well aware that all the three major parties had a consensus on launching austerity measures against the working class after the election, and life threatening cuts to public health sector would be implemented regardless of who won. Yet they offered the RCN congress stage, held just prior to the election, to Labour Party leader Gordon Brown, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg and Conservative Andrew Lansley.

Likewise when the Labour government presented its Green Paper on social care in England to find ways to slash spending on elderly and social care in July 2009, the RCN joined the media and apologists for big business in welcoming it. Carter wrote in the August 12, 2009, issue of the RCN bulletin, “Last month the government published a hugely important piece of work—the social care Green Paper”.

Fundamentally the RCN’s “Front Line First” campaign is aimed at demanding its members tighten their belts to allow the coalition government to carry out austerity measures.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact