

UK: NHS Trust quits South West Pay Consortium after unions agree cuts

Eric Gold
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The withdrawal of Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospital (RBCH) NHS Foundation Trust from the South West Pay Terms and Conditions Consortium is not the victory proclaimed by the trade unions.

The RBCH's withdrawal is because the unions on the National Health Service Staff Council agreed November 9 to most key aspects of the business plan drawn up by 19 NHS trusts participating in what is in effect a pay cartel. They even went a step further.

The new agreement will be imposed nationally, not just in the South West, confirming that the pay cartel was a test case. Cuts to wages and conditions include the introduction of performance-based incremental progression, an end to sickness absence enhancements, and the removal of accelerated pay progression for Pay Band Five workers, including nurses, physiotherapists and radiographers.

RBCH Chief Executive Tony Spotswood made clear his satisfaction at getting what he wanted in a terse statement issued last week. "The Board is encouraged by the progress made in the national negotiations and wishes to see these continue as we strive for pay, terms and conditions," he said.

The remaining pay cartel executives insist that they are committed to bringing the full business plan in before the end of this year, despite RBCH's withdrawal.

As a founding member of the pay cartel created earlier this year, Spotswood along with other members argued that a 10 percent reduction in the pay bill was

necessary to meet the efficiency targets set out by the government. At the time RBCH was running with an operational surplus of £9 million after cutting down services, closing wards, freezing recruitments and increasing workloads. They justified the need to impose a local solution, claiming there was not enough progress with national negotiations.

Spotswood, the RBCH Board and NHS employers nationally are the ones celebrating a victory. Government ministers must also be rubbing their hands with glee. The new agreement fulfils the demands Chancellor George Osborne made of the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPR) at the end of last year to make pay more "market-facing". It proves that the Department of Health was correct when, in evidence to the NHSPRB, it said that it could work with the unions and NHS employers in the NHS Staff Council to deliver such "market-facing" pay using the existing Agenda for Change (AfC) framework.

The unions are trying to use the withdrawal of RBCH to dazzle workers with a sense of victory and to cover up their agreement to cut pay terms and conditions nationally. Christina McAnea, Unison's head of health, said, "This is the right decision and good news for patients and staff.

"We hope that other trusts in the South West Cartel will also review their involvement in the consortium. *Unison will work with them to address the serious financial issues they are facing*" (emphasis added).

The Royal College on Nursing (RCN) chief executive and general secretary, Dr. Peter Carter, added, "This is testament to the hard work of our members across the

region who have made their voices heard loud clear.”

This is so much hot air. A branch meeting of the RCN East Dorset branch (which covers workers in RBCH) in October did not even have the pay cartel and its attacks on the agenda.

The only action the unions have undertaken is side-tracking opposition to the cuts into a petition campaign appealing to Members of Parliament—the very people responsible for the attacks on the NHS and health workers.

The extent of the opposition being suppressed is reflected in the remarks of former Labour health minister Ben Bradshaw, whose constituency is in the south west constituency of Exeter. During a debate on a Labour Party motion on NHS regional pay in the House of Commons on November 7, Bradshaw declared, “Never in more than 17 years in this place have I received so many letters and emails expressing such anger and such dismay as I have on this issue.”

Bradshaw was a member of the Labour government under Tony Blair that introduced AfC in 2004, which allowed individual employers to vary pay and conditions through the use of local Recruitment and Retention Premiums, and NHS Foundation Trusts to renegotiate their terms and conditions outside of national frameworks. At the time the unions downplayed these clauses and assured health workers that by voting for AfC their terms and conditions would be safeguarded.

With the defeat of the Labour Party motion, the green light was given to unions to sign the national agreement two days later.

It is clear that the South West pay cartel was a Trojan horse constructed by government and trust executives. It gave the union leaders an excuse to impose cuts to wages and conditions without a fight, using the pathetic claim that if they didn’t agree a national deal the pay cartel would go ahead and impose a worse one. Their capitulation will only encourage the government and NHS employers to demand further cuts and increased privatisation of health care, which the union leaders will happily agree to in order to protect their fat salaries

and privileges.

Action committees, totally independent from the trade unions, are needed to launch a struggle with the help of the wider public and patients to defend the NHS and the pay, terms and conditions of health workers. Such action committees must adopt a socialist strategy to bring down the government, which is responsible for the massive 20 percent cuts to the NHS budget and other vicious austerity measures.



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