

Staff strike at Mid Yorkshire Hospital Trust in England

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Administration workers and clerical staff at three hospitals making up the Mid Yorkshire Hospital Trust in England began a five-day strike on Monday.

The strike at Pinderfields, Pontefract and Dewsbury is the third in as many months, involving up to 500 mainly female workers threatened with job losses and wages cuts.

Hospital management claim that they must make £24 million in cuts to overcome the trust's £26 million deficit. It has issued sacking threats to 162 staff, telling them they must accept revised conditions and pay if they are to be re-employed. The trust wants to cut pay by up to 20 percent—some £2,800 a year—in a “re-banding” of pay grades.

The plans were first announced last autumn and were firmly rejected by the already low-paid workers who held a one-day strike on November 1 and a three-day strike on November 20.

Following the strike the Unison and Unite trade unions met with management in an attempt to settle the dispute. The trust's proposal that the present salaries of staff would be “protected” for 18 months before the pay cuts took effect was almost unanimously rejected when put to workers in December.

The five-day action is a sign of deep hostility and opposition to the cuts in pay, conditions and vital services being imposed as part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's austerity measures. On Saturday, 25,000 people demonstrated in south east London to oppose plans to close Lewisham Hospital's Accident & Emergency unit and to downgrade its maternity ward. Nationally, the government has demanded a £20 billion cut in the NHS budget by 2015, as part of its efforts to dismantle universal health care and hand it over to the private sector. More than 30 Accident and Emergency departments are to close,

along with children's units and other wards and facilities. Thousands of jobs are being destroyed and pay cuts imposed.

In every instance, the trade unions are smothering opposition to this assault. Last year, 19 trusts in south west England formed a pay consortium to impose massive cuts in pay and conditions for 60,000 NHS workers. The unions responded by agreeing a national deal that accepted many of the cartel's demands.

Workers employed by Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust in north west England are presently set to ballot on action over pay and conditions. Sixty staff at the Wigan Infirmary laboratory in the north west have also been issued with a “take it or leave it” ultimatum, after months of threats that their pay could be cut by up to £6,000 a year.

The unions have done nothing to unify these disputes much less mobilise a broader struggle involving NHS employees, patients and the local community. In the week running up to the Mid Yorks strike, talks were held between management and the unions under the auspices of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), but no agreement was reached.

Unison is desperate for management at the Mid Yorkshire Trust to offer some proposal it can try and sell to the membership. In a statement issued last month, regional organiser Jim Bell stated, “The mood of the workforce is resolute... The action so far has involved only admin and clerical staff, but now we are considering balloting the whole branch of about 3,000 members, including porters, cleaners, nurses and lab technicians. We have had four days of strike action, but the trust has not negotiated with us. We have had talks, but what we want is genuine negotiations.”

Adrian O'Malley, Unison Mid Yorkshire health branch secretary and Socialist Party member, in the

same statement said, “What we want is management to negotiate. They are tearing up Agenda for Change. About 70 clerical and management jobs are going through voluntary severance, so we say: You’ve got the 70, you’ve made your savings, now leave our members’ wages alone.”

The Agenda for Change, introduced by the Labour government in 2004, was the means for introducing provisions to end national pay agreements and introduce productivity-based pay. Hailed by the unions at the time, it has provided the mechanism for the government and management to extend this attack.

Not only does O’Malley claim that this is what must be defended, but he is indifferent to the loss of 70 jobs. This is in line with the unions’ main complaint, which has been that management have opted for “compulsory” rather than “voluntary” redundancies.

As it pointed out previously, the Socialist Party has attempted to use the Mid Yorkshire Trust strike to bolster the discredited trade unions. When the first strike took place in November, its journal, *The Socialist*, cited approvingly comments by Unison Head of Health Christina McAnea to a rally of the Mid Yorkshire Trust strikers, where she claimed the union was leading a fight and praised O’Malley as the “best branch secretary”.

At the time, McAnea was chair of the staff side on the NHS Staff Council, which was sealing a deal with NHS employers nationally to cut wages and conditions and introduce performance-based pay.

The *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line at Pinderfields hospital on the first day of the strike. Reporters spoke to Bev, who explained, “I have worked at Pinderfields for 20 years and I am on less now than I was 10 or 15 years ago. We are fighting for our wages here. Some of our colleagues in the hospital say we are on holiday this week, but when it gets to their turn and they are being down-banded it will be different then.

“I would like to think we will be successful,” Bev said, “but management appear to be digging their heels in. We have come this far—we have to stick it out. We are worth the money we are getting. We are worth more and it is not fair that they are taking this money off us. We have to make a stand. It is not just going to stop with us. They will carry on and start down-banding everybody else.”

Glynis explained, “I am on grade three and if they go

ahead I will go down to a grade two. I would lose two or three thousand pounds a year. I am a widow. I still have the same bills to pay, and the bills are going up and up.”

Glynis has worked at the hospital for 41 years and prior to this dispute had not been out on strike: “This attack on our wages is just the tip of the iceberg,” she said. “It is going to affect everybody. They are trying to emotionally blackmail us, saying, ‘You don’t want people with cancer to suffer do you?’ I have just lost my husband to cancer. We have to stand up. In 12 months’ time if he [director of human resources—Graham Bell] gets his way and they down-band us to a two, they will down-band us to one next.”



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