

Hospital unions attempt sellout of British strike

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The Unison and Unite unions are desperately seeking to wind down a strike by National Health Service workers at the Mid Yorkshire Hospital Trust. The Trust, consisting of Dewsbury hospital, Pinderfields hospital at Wakefield and Pontefract hospital, faces a £26 million deficit in its budget.

Management responded by targeting around 500 low-paid clerical staff, including medical secretaries, for punishment. Some 150 of these mainly female workers were faced with the sack, and the remainder faced a “re-banding” of their pay grades. This would mean a pay cut of up to 20 percent, with some losing £2,800 a year.

Reflecting the deep hostility to cuts in conditions and services in the NHS nationally, the workers voted overwhelmingly to take action.

Unison has majority representation. A one-day strike was held on November 1 last year, followed by a three-day strike on November 20 and a five-day strike on January 28. The three periods of strike action shows the determination of the workers to oppose the attacks on their conditions.

In their fight they face not only an intransigent management, but unions which are isolating and smothering action when it occurs and providing a mechanism for management to be able to impose their attacks.

In a statement issued prior to the strike in January, Adrian O'Malley, Unison Mid Yorkshire health branch secretary, stated, “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.”

O'Malley is a member of the Socialist Party. He expresses the readiness of both the union bureaucracy

and his group to negotiate away jobs and conditions.

The Agenda for Change brought in by the Labour government in 2004 was a mechanism to end national pay agreements and move to productivity-based pay. His statement expressed indifference to the loss of 70 jobs and desperation that management was not offering any wriggle room to the union to be able to bring the dispute to an end.

Around 160 of the clerical workers had been issued letters by management in which they had to sign up to the new terms (cuts in pay) or be sacked, giving a deadline of February 15. Many had publicly burnt their letters in an act of defiance at a rally during the strike when they lobbied a Trust Board meeting.

At a subsequent meeting of the strikers, a proposal to escalate the action by calling on the union to ballot all 3,000 Unison members in the Mid Yorkshire Hospital Trust was overwhelmingly passed.

This has been left on the shelf.

Meetings between management and the unions have taken place since the five days of strike action. The hospital management had agreed to extend the deadline for accepting the down-banding of pay or be sacked, to February 28.

A meeting was scheduled for February 25 to discuss alternative proposals put forward by the union. In anticipation of the meeting, Graham Briggs, the trust's director of Human Resources, stated, “We look forward to working with our union colleagues with the aim of mutually resolving the dispute.”

Among the proposals presented by the unions was that the clerical workers remain on their current pay rates, but that their hours be cut—resulting in an average of four-and-a-half hours less per week. The unions added that through more efficient work methods, the workers would be able to cover the same amount of

work in the reduced hours. The unions also said plans to ballot the Mid Yorkshire branch membership would be put on hold.

The trust management said they would be prepared to offer protection of loss of earnings as a result of the reduction in hours to be paid up front for between 18 and 24 months depending on the grade.

The February 25 meeting was to the mutual satisfaction of the unions and management, with the trust agreeing to further extend the deadline for the workers to accept the worse conditions to March 22.

A joint statement issued by Graham Briggs for the trust and Unison regional organiser Jim Bell said, “We had a constructive meeting on Monday (February 25) and have agreed to meet again on Monday March 21 to give the trust time to consider the proposal in detail. We remain committed to working together to reach a mutually agreed outcome.”

O’Malley added, “We have made good progress and it’s looking a lot more positive. The proposals are being considered and we are putting more flesh on the bones. We are quite pleased with where things are going.”

The Socialist Equality Party’s NHS FightBack campaign has warned consistently that the trade unions are playing a key role in enabling the government to push its measures through by restricting opposition to job losses on a local or regional basis. Now, when a serious struggle breaks out, they are doing all in their power to betray it.

A constant refrain of the union bureaucracy is that more cannot be done because their members are not ready for a broader, deeper offensive. Now, when confronted with a demand for collective regional and national action, the response is to rush pell-mell to a rotten settlement. In the process, the pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Party, distinguish themselves as the loyal defenders of a bureaucracy into which they have become fully integrated and a propaganda department dedicated to justifying each and every sellout.

Hospital workers seeking to defend their jobs and services must mobilise independently of the treacherous pro-management, pro-business trade unions on a socialist programme. Those ready to do so should contact the SEP and www.nhsfightback.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact