

UK: Unite union imposes Salford NHS Trust's attacks on workers

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Unite trade union, in collaboration with health managers, has forced through pay cuts of up to £6,000 a year against 60 pathology staff at Salford Royal Hospital National Health Trust Laboratory.

The workers at the hospital trust in the North West of England were originally balloted in September 2012 for strike action over plans to slash their pay, which union leaders said was the “last straw for most staff.”

Opposed to calling an all-out strike, Unite stalled any industrial action in order to continue negotiations. In March, the union announced that the dispute was over, despite the workers having once again voted to reject the hospital management's final offer.

Gary Owen, Unite north-western regional officer, said that after “months of fraught negotiations” with hospital management, “we are at a position of reluctant acceptance of the latest offer from the Trust. Our members narrowly rejected their final offer, but industrial action has not been approved and there is no indication that this will change. We are in a better place than when we first started negotiations but not where our members want us to be.”

As a result of Unite's acceptance, staff at Wigan Infirmary, also in the North West, will be transferred to Salford Royal Hospital and be forced to take pay cuts. Following the sell-out, a spokesman for Pathology at Wigan and Salford said, “We are really pleased that we have been able to reach an agreement with staff and avoid industrial action on both sites.”

In April 2012, the Pathology service at Salford Royal took over the service at Wigan Infirmary, only a year after Wigan had absorbed the service provided at Wroughtington and Leigh hospitals. The service is now known as PAWS (Pathology at Wigan and Salford).

In late 2012, tenders were sought for the provision of pathology services, raising the possibility of a

privatised service. By that time, biomedical staff who typically earn between £21,000 and £35,000, and are qualified to degree level with post-graduate training, had already suffered a three-year pay freeze, a huge reduction in payments for working unsocial hours and an imposed increase in their pension contributions by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

Some staff had lost up to 30 percent of their earnings, and some had been forced to remortgage their homes. Yet others had to rent out their properties and move in with family. The situation was worsened by the fact that the journey for blood and other samples from Wigan to Salford is 15 miles and the IT system at Salford is regarded as outdated.

Using the union's refusal to call strike action, Trust management approached staff between August 2012 and February 2013 on an individual basis, asking them to sign an agreement to settle the dispute.

Attacks on pay and conditions of pathology staff are not confined to the North West. In a related dispute, 30 biochemists at Milton Keynes Hospital Foundation Trust in the East Midlands have been working to rule since February 19 in opposition to a new contract. Under this contract, a previously voluntary agreement for “secondary cover” at nights and weekends would be compulsory. Staff would receive £25 as a 12-hour standby payment on top of their 37.5-hour week. Under the old agreement, work during unsocial hours was paid at £25 per hour.

Despite an overwhelming vote for strike action, the union again refused to organise anything beyond the limited work-to-rule. Debbie Watson, regional officer for Unite, said, “We call on the Trust to reverse the compulsory element of the contract so that our already hard working members can enjoy a decent work/life balance”.

This humble appeal echoes that of Gary Owen, who commented at the start of the dispute, “We urge the trust to work with us to examine other ways of making the efficiency savings it alleges are required.”

Attacks on the wages and conditions of pathology staff are being conducted under the Agenda for Change introduced by the Labour government of Tony Blair in 2004 to “rationalise” pay structures in the National Health Service (NHS).

In 2010 former Labour chancellor Alastair Darling announced that £20 billion in efficiency savings needed to be cut from the NHS. These cuts are now being carried through by the coalition government. In the North West region alone, some £950 million in savings would have to be made over a three- to four-year period.

Salford Royal Hospital Trust announced the shedding of 750 jobs over three years, meaning that many of the around-500 staff—out of a total of 6,000 workers—who leave each year would not be replaced. In the region as a whole, huge cuts would have to be made over three years in the primary, community, acute and mental health sectors.

So deep were the cuts that by February 2011, more than 50,000 jobs had gone from the NHS. Some 24,000 posts had been lost in hospitals, 10,000 in primary care Trusts and 6,000 in mental health trusts.

A report in the *Guardian* found that Salford Royal Hospital Trust shed the whole-time equivalent of 196.82 jobs in 2010/2011, among them 73.21 in nursing and 13.87 in scientific staff, with the same level of losses in 2011/2012. The Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust was, the report continued, planning to shed the whole-time equivalent of 533 jobs (13 percent) in the period from 2010 to 2014.

The trade unions have accepted all these cuts and every attack on wages and conditions.

A critical part of the cuts drive is the further reduction of wages and conditions. NHS employers have made it clear in their submissions that they are looking to further “pay restraint”, pointing out that normal incremental pay that staff have expected lessens the effect of “wage freezes”.

Having accepted the original pay freeze, Unison, the largest union in the public sector, in the autumn of 2012 asked the Review Body of the Agenda for Change “to record the important role that the workforce has played

in meeting the expanding demands on the NHS in the context of restricted resources.” It asked the body “to consider the impact of a near total pay freeze during a period of high inflation on the declining standard of living faced by NHS staff.”

Unison further requested an “increase in the minimum wage within the NHS to bring it in line with the Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standard of £7.67 an hour.”

On February 7, however, the *Nursing Times* reported that Unison, together with the Royal College of Nursing, had accepted “proposals to dilute the Agenda for Change,” thus “marking a significant step towards their introduction.”

These proposals include an end to automatic incremental pay rises and the scrapping of enhanced out-of-hours sick pay. Senior staff on higher pay could also be removed from the Agenda for Change entirely and paid an individual spot salary.

While working with management to ensure pay cuts are made and jobs lost, Unite has launched a fraudulent “Save our NHS” campaign. This consists of the sending of a “prescription flyer” to Prime Minister David Cameron and MPs, which states, “David Cameron has broken every one of his promises on the NHS” and pathetically adds, “Help us hold David Cameron to his promises to protect our NHS.”



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