

British health unions carrying out fraudulent “fair pay fight”

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National Health Service (NHS) workers in England are striking for a second time today against the attacks on their pay and conditions. The ten unions involved have limited the action to a four-hour walkout followed by a week of work to rule, the same procedure adopted last month.

The main demand is that the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government implement the paltry below-inflation one percent pay rise recommended by the NHS Pay Review Body (PRB). The 1.3 million workers in the NHS have seen their pay eroded by 10 to 15 percent since 2010, as a result of four years of pay freezes. A survey carried out by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) found that nearly two-thirds of NHS staff rely on supplementary earnings to support their salary. Approximately one-third rely on unsocial hours payments to maintain their standard of living.

The head of health for the Unite union, Rachael Maskell, criticised the one percent pay rise as a “pocket money offer” but does not explain why Unite and the other unions are not demanding more and are continuing to plead with the government to “respect future PRB recommendations”.

The government claims that if the PRB recommendations were accepted, it would mean further job cuts. The only crumb thrown to the unions in a “revised” offer was a non-consolidated one percent pay rise for those NHS workers at the top of their pay bands and not entitled to an incremental pay rise. The non-consolidated pay is not included in the hourly rate, so overtime, unsocial hours and pensionable pay do not increase accordingly.

The government has attached the string of freezing all incremental increases in return for a meagre one percent consolidated pay increase next year. It made it clear in early 2013 that NHS workers would not be

given a pay rise again this year, but the unions refused to mobilise a serious campaign against this threat. It took almost a year for a ballot to be held in England. When substantial majorities were recorded for strike action, it suddenly dawned on Maskell that “Our members are furious that the government vetoed the one percent pay rise.”

Unison, Unite and the GMB did not ballot their membership in Scotland, accepting the below-inflation one percent rise given by the Scottish government along the lines of the PRB’s recommendation—with an uplift of the lowest paid to the “Living Wage” level of £7.65 per hour.

In Wales, the scheduled four-hour walkout on November 10 was called off by Unison after accepting a rotten deal with the Labour Party-led Welsh Assembly which restrains pay for two years. Even the one percent pay rise won’t be implemented until next April and workers will have to put up with a non-consolidated lump sum of £187 this year. Unison again tries to obscure the rottenness of the deal by focusing on the lowest paid receiving a “Living Wage”.

After calling off the strike, Dawn Bowden of Unison said, “We have a government in Wales that we work very well with, that we work in partnership with, and that politically on a lot of areas, particularly around the NHS, we’re on the same page with.”

The Royal College of Nurses has not even called a ballot, totally disregarding members’ opposition to government attacks.

Not only have the unions split up health workers in England, Scotland and Wales, but they have also avoided any joint action with the 1.5 million workers in local government and schools who have suffered years of pay freezes and cuts to jobs and pensions. The three unions that represent these workers, Unison, GMB and

Unite, suspended strike action alongside NHS workers in October, claiming they wanted further consultation with their members on a new proposal from the Local Government Association, even though it fell “far below the aspirations in the union’s 2014-15 pay claim and far below what members deserve”.

The principal goal of the unions is to suppress the anger felt by the workers against funding cuts, which have jeopardised patient care and severely eroded pay, terms and conditions. They are attempting to railroad workers behind the goal of electing a Labour government next year, portraying it as the saviour of the NHS while disregarding its 13-year record in office. The £20 billion in cuts to the NHS budget over the last five years were originally planned by Labour following the 2008 global financial crisis. The Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition carried out that plan ruthlessly and are proposing to cut the NHS budget by a further £10 billion by 2021.

It was Labour’s Private Finance Initiative that began the privatisation process, now being taken forward by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and the transferring of large swathes of NHS funding to Clinical Commissioning Groups that buy substantial amounts of health provision from private companies.

The Socialist Equality Party and the NHS Fightback campaign call on workers to build action committees based on a socialist programme to take up the fight to defend the NHS and protect pay, terms and conditions independently of the unions and in struggle against them.



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