

# Care UK workers asked to vote for massive pay cut

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After 90 days of strike action to defend their wages, Care UK workers are being asked to vote to accept what is in effect up to a 33 percent pay cut.

Having cut their pay by up to 35 percent when it took over the contract for the learning disability service from the Labour-run Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, Care UK has offered the workers a miserly 2 percent pay rise, barely equivalent to the official rate of inflation. An additional one-off £500 payment has been offered to staff who transferred to Care UK from their previous employer, Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS (National Health Service) Foundation Trust.

The hard truth the Care UK workers now confront is that Unison, the organisation they turned to seeking support for their struggle, has betrayed them. It cynically reports the impending ballot on its web site, saying, “Our Care UK members in Doncaster must be congratulated on the success of their sustained strike action.”

If a 33 percent pay cut is success, one dreads to think what failure would look like.

The origins of the strike, one of the longest disputes by care workers in Britain, dates back to when Care UK took over learning disability services in 2013. The service provides home support in the South Yorkshire town. Doncaster Council claimed that central government cuts meant it could no longer afford to keep running the service and put it out to tender. Care UK lodged a successful bid of £6.7 million for three years. However, it was clear that any service based on this tender would be impossible to deliver without massively attacking the wages and conditions of staff, and offering a worse service. The previous wage bill alone had totalled £7 million, according to the *Guardian*.

Predictably, once Care UK was in charge of the service, it brought in 100 new workers, paying them £7 an hour, just 50p above the national minimum wage and well below the wage levels paid when the service was run by the public sector.

Care UK is a private health and social care service provider that has built its business by winning contracts from local authorities and central government. Launched in 1982, the company has profited handsomely from the privatisation agenda under both Conservative and Labour governments, acquiring retirement and nursing homes, mental health facilities, supported living services and Independent Sector Treatment Centres (ISTCs) providing services to NHS patients. The company operates more than 120 care homes throughout Britain.

In 2010, Care UK was bought by Bridgepoint Capital, a private equity company that likes to “acquire companies with strong market positions and earnings growth potential where significant additional value can be created through expansion and operational improvement.” In plain English this means sacking workers, forcing down wages, and pushing up workloads in order to ensure a profit.

The same methods have been employed in Doncaster. This time, however, the care workers took a principled stand to defend their wages and conditions. From the start, they have faced a battle not just with Care UK, but also with their union. Rather than mobilise health and care workers against the ongoing assaults on jobs, wages and conditions in the NHS and in the private sector, Unison sought to wear down the resolve of the strikers in a series of limited and futile actions. The strikers were encouraged to seek the support of Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, who is also MP for Doncaster North. Needless to say, not even a token

expression of solidarity was forthcoming. The Labour Party is responsible for the situation facing the Care UK workers, since it controls the local authority that privatised their jobs.

As a result, the number on strike has steadily declined from the original 93 who refused to sign the new pay-slashing contracts with Care UK. Now, only some 50 strikers remain to vote on the company's "offer". Since they are now a minority of the workforce, it is likely that the deal will go through.

The most politically criminal role in the dispute has been played by various pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. Their advice to the strikers has consisted of telling them to put pressure on the union bureaucracy to take more militant action.

After 34 days of strike action, the Socialist Party gushed, "Dave Prentis, Unison general secretary, visited the Doncaster picket line pledging 100% support. Strikers were invited to Unison head office where they got tea and biscuits and met with Christina McAnea, Unison's Head of Health."

This drivel was accompanied by a photograph of a beaming Prentis alongside striking Care UK workers. Prentis has much to smile about; he enjoys a salary of £92,000 plus at least £35,000 in "benefits", earning more in 45 days than the average care worker earns in a year.

Now, after 90 days' strike action, the union's "100 percent support" has resulted in a 33 percent pay cut.

In its coverage of this debacle, the Socialist Party rubs salt in the wounds, saying it "salutes the inspiring struggle of the Care UK strikes and will continue to support them 100% if the pay deal is rejected."

After doing everything to keep the struggle under the control of the union, the Socialist Workers Party cynically writes, "It will be a bitter pill to swallow for the strikers who want to reject the deal after months of promises from Unison's leadership to do 'everything in our power' to beat Care UK. That national union backing never fully materialised."

Neither of these pseudo-left organisations is capable of mounting a struggle against the pro-Labour policies of the union bureaucracy, since their own members occupy leading positions inside the apparatus, enjoying the privileges that this brings.

The bitter lesson that confronts the Care UK workers

is that their struggle is doomed to failure as long as it remains under the control of the unions and politically wedded to the Labour Party.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to form Action Committees, independent of the trade unions, across the health and care sectors. They must coordinate real solidarity between workers in struggle and reach out to communities badly affected through the savage cuts in health care. The struggle to oppose the unprecedented attacks on pay and conditions, and to prevent the dismantling and privatisation of health care, must be based on a political struggle against the source of these attacks—capitalism. We appeal to all health and care workers to contact the NHS Fightback campaign initiated by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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