

# British unions recommend health service workers accept another pay cut

Ajanta Silva  
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Unions in England are recommending National Health Service (NHS) workers drop their opposition to a pay freeze for 2014-15 and accept a miserly one percent rise in 2015-16. This represents yet another pay cut.

NHS workers have already suffered a four-year pay freeze, had their pay slashed by 10-15 percent, experienced worsening job conditions and have been forced to contribute more towards their pensions.

Eight unions involved in the NHS, including Unison, Unite, GMB, Society of Radiographers and Royal College of Midwives, suspended a 12-hour strike on January 29, declaring it was “the best deal that could be achieved through negotiation.”

A key reason for ending the strike is to prevent any embarrassment for the Labour Party as the May general election looms. Labour has made the NHS a major issue in the election, although it is committed to austerity measures and cuts to public spending.

The unions claimed that they had received a “not insignificant” last-minute concession from the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition. Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt signed the pay proposal just two days prior to the planned strike with the “hope that this offer will enable Trade Unions in dispute to suspend planned industrial action.”

The strike went ahead in North Ireland where the unions have not got any pay deal as such to sell to their members.

The government proposal includes a one percent pay rise for workers up to pay point 42 from April 2015, with a £200 per year increase for the lowest paid—those on pay point 8 or below. Pay point 1 will be abolished and workers moved to pay point 2 (£15,100 a year). These increases will be paid for by freezing the pay of those earning over £56,000 and stopping the

incremental progression of those earning over £40,500.

The proposal excludes any back pay for 2014-15, one of the key issues behind the strike, effectively continuing the four-year pay freeze for another year.

As a part of an agreement, Hunt demanded the unions “commit to work together with the NHS employers to ensure this remains affordable” and “to commit to talks on further reforming of Agenda for Change pay system” to make sure “it can continue to deliver flexibility, capacity, fairness and value.”

The NHS Employers Association said it was “delighted” and praised the unions for making the “right decision” by calling off the strike. Chief Executive Danny Mortimer declared, “If the unions proceed to fully accept the proposed pay agreement it will demonstrate a commitment and signal the start of a period of negotiations to deliver long-term pay reform in the NHS.”

The Department of Health has already given some idea of what reforms it has in mind in its submission to the NHS Pay Review Body—the end of enhanced pay for working unsocial hours and annual incremental pay progression, which it declares are not affordable within the current financial climate.

After suspending the union action, Unison Head of Health Christina McAnea, lead negotiator for the health unions, said, “The two strike days staged by health workers last year have moved the government to negotiate with the unions.” She claimed that “these new proposals deliver pay rises of between 5.6 percent and 2.2 percent for more than 200,000 of the lowest paid workers in the NHS.”

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapists’ Jill Barker was more circumspect. After saying “this new offer represents a better deal than originally proposed by government”—not difficult given the government

didn't want any pay rise—she admitted, “The offer certainly isn't brilliant.”

Many NHS workers already rely on unsocial hours enhancements, work in the Staff Resource Pool (Bank) or do other jobs to keep their heads above water. By accepting this rotten pay deal, unions not only pit one section of workers against the other, but pave the way for further inroads into pay terms and conditions.

In Scotland, the same unions did not even call a ballot when the government implemented the Pay Review Board-recommended below-inflation pay rise. In Wales, the scheduled four-hour walkout on November 10 last year was called off by Unison after accepting a deal with the Labour Party-led Welsh Assembly, which restrains pay for two years.

Unite and GMB officials in Northern Ireland complain they have not got a pay proposal which matches the one in England. Michael Mulholland, GMB regional officer, said, “NHS workers are furious and the public will want to know why the Department of Health [Northern Ireland] is not putting the offer in England on the table as they are expected to do.”

The attacks on NHS workers is a vital element in the government's £20 billion cuts to the NHS budget over the last five years, as a part of the austerity measures implemented in the aftermath of the 2008 financial breakdown. It is demanding a further £10 billion in cuts by 2021.

Last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, when NHS workers balloted to strike, “A mandate for strike action by the members of Unison, Unite, GMB and the RCN will not be used to galvanise opposition to pay restraint but to dissipate and demoralise resistance, while convincing the government that the services of the unions are required to forestall a general mobilisation. Where they cannot prevent strikes, the unions are only prepared to hold them on a token basis.”

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, in contrast, proclaimed it as proof of a resurgence of the unions as a force to defend the working class and oppose austerity. After the unions suspended the January 29 strike action, portraying the government proposal as a victory, the *Socialist Worker* urged “every activist now has to fight for a No vote and get the action back on.”

The Socialist Party complained, “More could be

achieved if we had a determined and strong leadership. NHS England bosses all but admitted they were in a difficult position and wanted to end the action. In these circumstances, it is a poor negotiator indeed who manages to come up with less pay than the small amount that was asked for.”

No one will be able to resuscitate these putrefying union corpses as fighting organs of the working class. Time and again, unions have proven that they are not only against mounting any genuine opposition to these attacks, but work as an extended arm of the ruling elite in imposing them. On every occasion, the pseudo-lefts cover for their betrayals and try to convince workers that the union bureaucrats will fight if only enough pressure is applied.

What is required to fight back is the urgent building of action committees independent of the unions. We call on the NHS workers to reject with contempt this utterly rotten pay deal and to intensify their struggle under a socialist programme.



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