

UK: Oppose introduction of student nurse tuition fees and scrapping of bursaries

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Students of nursing, midwifery and Allied Health Professions (AHPs) are demonstrating today in London against the imposition of tuition fees and scrapping of already underfunded bursaries by the Conservative government.

The demonstration takes place two days before a parliamentary debate on the issue. The debate was triggered after an online petition opposing government plans attracted more than 100,000 signatures within a few weeks of it launching. Several other demonstrations in support of the nurses are taking place nationwide.

Last December hundreds of student nurses took part in a protest organised by the Nursing and Midwifery Society of King's College London.

These protests coincide with the junior doctors' struggle against new contracts, which will slash their pay by 20-30 percent and create precarious working conditions. Last month, the British Medical Association (BMA) called off scheduled strikes amid massive opposition of junior doctors. Following a failure of the BMA to reach agreement in subsequent talks with Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, they are rescheduled to begin next week.

Chancellor George Osborne in his autumn spending review proposed ending free undergraduate training and scrapping means tested bursaries for student nurses and students of AHPs including midwifery, physiotherapy and radiography. From September 2017, they will have to fund their education, as do other students, through loans amounting to £9,000 a year.

The claim that these changes would create 10,000 more places for nursing, midwifery and AHP students is a lie. The government states this will eliminate chronic staff shortages in hospitals across the country, after they created the shortages through years of

underspending and slashing of jobs, including frontline staff.

The 2010-2015 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition recorded the lowest ever real-term funding of the National Health Service (NHS) in its history, despite claiming that health spending was "ring-fenced". Now the Tories are demanding a further £22 billion in NHS "efficiency savings" by 2020, knowing the disastrous consequences the previous £20 billion in cuts had on staff levels, patient safety and care.

The government's callous indifference towards patient care and safety is demonstrated by its abandonment of the safe staff levels recommended by the Francis Inquiry into the failings of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. A recent study by the *Health Service Journal* of 232 hospitals in England found that 207, or 90 percent, were unable to meet safe staff levels during the day.

Central to the imposition of tuition fees on trainee nurses is the plan to slash the £5 billion education and training budget held by the NHS's Health Education England (HEE). NHS Student Bursaries currently pay bursaries worth over £500 million to over 80,000 students at over 120 universities each year. It is estimated that a student nurse graduating in 2020 could leave with debts over £50,000.

The fees of trainee nurses were paid and bursaries awarded for nursing, midwifery and AHPs students in recognition that they spend as much as half of their university time in clinical settings, working alongside qualified staff in order to gain knowledge, skills and experience. They contribute to the day-to-day functioning of the hospital wards, community teams and special units during their placements.

Currently, the tuition fees of Nurses and AHPs students are paid to universities directly by the NHS.

Students of these health professions also receive a means tested bursary and £1,000 grant from NHS and a reduced Maintenance Loan from Student Finance England. This means a student outside of London could receive a maximum of £5,915 in support per year, £3,591 from grant and bursary and £2,324 from a loan. A student in London could have a total of £7,391, £4,128 from grant and bursary and £3,263 from loans.

According to a survey by the Unison public sector union, 90 percent of current nurses would not have been able to complete their training without a bursary.

Eliminating this support would have a devastating impact on students from working class backgrounds and students who choose to join these professions after completing a first degree with resulting debts. Many students of nursing, midwifery or AHPs are older than the average student and have families to provide for. Several professional bodies have warned that imposing tuition fees and scrapping bursaries will put off many from choosing a career in the health sector, aggravating the already festering shortages of nurses, midwives and AHPs.

It was the Labour government under Tony Blair that first introduced tuition fees for university students in 2004. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition tripled tuition fees to £9,000 a year, scrapped the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) of £30 per week for young people from low-income families in post-16 education and implemented major cuts at universities and colleges.

Students of nursing, midwifery and AHPs must draw lessons from the previous struggles of the working class and students. There has been no lack of opposition to these attacks by successive governments. More than 50,000 students demonstrated in London against the tuition fee hike in November 2010. There were large nationwide demonstrations against the attacks on education and scrapping EMA.

These struggles were sabotaged by the National Union of Students (NUS), Educational Activist Network and the National Campaign against Cuts and Fees (NCACF), who claimed these attacks could be fought by appealing to the very governments and MPs imposing them.

Several trade unions are now officially backing the student nurses, including Unison, Unite, Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Royal College of Midwifery

(RCM). Once again they are seeking to dissipate the struggles of student nurses in a campaign based on signing petitions and lobbying MPs. In this, the unions are supported by the various pseudo-left outfits such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (S).

NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, calls on all NHS workers to link up their struggles with all those facing cuts to their jobs, wages and living standards, through the building of rank-and-file committees in a rebellion against the trade unions. The fight against austerity must be based in a struggle against the capitalist profit system, for the bringing down of the Tories and for a workers' government based on socialist policies.

For further information visit [HYPERLINK "http://nhsfightback.org"](http://nhsfightback.org)



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