

UK unions agree to implement pay cuts for NHS workers

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The British government is enforcing a miserly 1 percent increase in pay on over a million public sector workers, including National Health Service (NHS) employees. Prison staff are receiving just 1.3 percent from this month.

A Conservative government Treasury statement read: “The public sector pay bill makes up over half of departmental resource spending, so continued pay restraint remains central to the government’s deficit reduction strategy.”

The policy would continue throughout this Parliament and given an “increasingly turbulent global economy, pay restraint continues to be a key part of our plan to finish fixing the public finances.”

What is being presented by the government as a pay rise is effectively a pay cut. A series of pay freezes has meant an actual 15 percent cut to take-home pay even after the 1 percent award. Six million public and private sector workers, including NHS workers, have found their pay further slashed as a result of changes to pension schemes. From April, they will have to pay 1.4 percent more towards their National Insurance contributions. The Tories are aiming to rake in £5.5 billion a year to the treasury’s coffers at the expense of workers.

The government is demanding further changes to the NHS Agenda for Change pay system in order to cut the pay bill. An integral part of this is imposing inferior contracts, on junior doctors and non-medical staff, in order to have a seven-day service without spending any more money.

The Department of Health (DoH), in written evidence to the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB) 2016, states: “To support the delivery of seven day services, we have embarked on *contract reform right across the non-medical and medical workforce*. Employers tell us that

they need contracts that work for staff and patients and *which are affordable and sustainable*” (emphasis added).

After paving the way for years of pay freezes and erosion of working conditions, the trade unions have colluded with the government and accepted the 1 percent cap on pay this year and until 2020.

Unison is the largest union in the public sector, with nearly half a million members employed in the NHS. Its head of health, Christina McAnea, said, “This 1 percent pay rise falls way below what health workers need and deserve after years of pay cuts, especially as changes to national insurance and pension contributions will absorb much of this miserly increase.”

But neither McAnea nor the other the unions have called a single action against it. Nor have they called any act of solidarity with junior doctors currently fighting the imposition of inferior contracts detrimental to patient safety and their own health and wellbeing.

Unison issued a statement for its members saying that it is “fighting on several fronts to make NHS pay better,” by working “to maintain and improve the Agenda for Change (AfC) pay structure itself.” It claims the main problem with the pay structure is that too many pay points have to be climbed to the top of the pay bands, and there are overlapping of pay points in between bands. Therefore they are negotiating with the government to bring about a “simpler” structure.

But the evidence of the DoH to the NHSPRB exposes what this simple structure means. In fact, unions are involved in talks with the government to cut the NHS pay bill. It states, “Development of simpler pay structures with fewer pay points could and removing overlaps will over time help to reduce the inbuilt pressure of progression pay of £550 million gross.”

After the 2008 financial crisis, the Labour

government began imposing savage austerity after handing over £1.2 trillion pounds to bail the banks out. Labour instigated a plan for £20 billion in NHS “efficiency savings” as part of these attacks. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition carried out these plans ruthlessly during the last parliament regardless of the impact it had on patient care and pay terms and conditions.

The privatisation of the NHS, and a further £22 billion of “efficiency savings”, is going ahead without a finger being raised by the unions. The government passed the Health and Social Care Act in 2012 to accelerate the privatization process, calculating that the unions and Labour Party would mount no opposition. The same year the NHS unions signed a rotten agreement with the NHS Staff Council claiming this would stop NHS employers implementing regional pay systems. The agreement included the introduction of performance-based incremental pay progression.

In late 2014, the unions balloted their members in England amid growing anger against the pay freezes and eroding of working conditions. However, their main demand was a below inflation pay rise. The few subsequent strikes were fragmented, token in character and were rendered harmless. Unison, Unite and GMB not only separated the pay struggles of NHS workers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They 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, and had balloted for strike action at that time under the same unions.

In January last year, eight NHS unions including Unison, Unite and the GMB accepted a one percent pay rise for 2015/2016, declaring it was “the best deal that could be achieved through negotiation.” As a part of that agreement, Health Secretary Jeremy 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.” This was to ensure “it can continue to deliver flexibility, capacity, fairness and value.”

This is the mission the unions are now fulfilling. In a March update to its branch secretaries and stewards, Unison stated, “Most of the NHS trade unions have indicated they will not challenge the pay award.”

In an attempt to save face, Unison proclaimed in a bulletin to its members that any step towards reducing the payments for working unsocial hours would be answered with a “damaging industrial dispute” like that of the junior doctors.

Behind the rhetoric, Unison and the other health unions have worked to ensure the struggle of the junior doctors has been isolated. In the bulletin, Unison complained that the junior doctors’ strike has impeded its negotiations with the government. “Talks are progressing slower than we would like as the employers and the Department of Health have been tied up on the junior doctors dispute,” it declared.

NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, has consistently warned workers that the unions function as an arm of management. Workers must break with these rotten organisations and build independent committees of struggle to defend pay, terms and conditions and oppose the privatisation of public health care.

For further information contact:
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