

UK nurses in online vote over strike in protest at low pay

Margot Miller
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Some 270,000 UK nurses and care assistants, members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), are being asked if they are prepared to take strike action over pay and conditions.

Such is their anger and frustration over a derisory pay offer of just 1 percent recommended by the National Health Service (NHS) Pay Review Body, that nurses are engaged in an online consultation that will determine whether the RCN proceeds with an official strike ballot.

The pay offer is in reality a substantial pay cut, with inflation running at 2.3 percent and rising.

Nurses are being asked if they are prepared to take strike action, or action short of strike action, such as only working contracted hours, demanding overtime pay, and not completing duties expected of a higher band.

The online vote is open until May 7, with the result to be announced at the RCN conference in Liverpool next month.

A strike would be unprecedented, as were the strikes by 50,000 junior hospital doctors, who took part in strikes last year over the imposition by the government of an inferior contract. The junior doctors' struggle was sold out by the British Medical Association.

Nurses, as members of other unions, have taken strike action before, but not RCN members. The RCN was founded as a professional association in 1916 but only registered as a trade union in 1977.

The years of austerity since the bailout of the banks in 2008, which followed the global financial crash, have led to nurses' salaries being eroded by 14 percent. According to Theresa Fyffe, director of the RCN in Scotland, some nurses have had to use "food banks in some cases, they are doing double jobs and we also know that nurses have actually applied to our RCN

Foundation for hardship grants [of up £500]. We see that there's been a 50 percent rise since 2010—that's 700 nurses across the United Kingdom."

According to data obtained by the *Sunday Mirror*, 3,000 nurses have applied for high-interest payday loans in the last six months alone, as their income cannot cover their day-to-day needs.

A registered nurse earns an average of just £23,319 per year. Had nurses' pay kept up with inflation, they would now earn £26,584 (£3,265 more).

Years of pay restraint are partly responsible for the tens of thousands of unfilled nursing posts. Both Labour and Conservative governments have cut nurses pay and the number of nurse training places was cut by 17 percent between 2009 and 2013.

Today there are 24,000 nursing vacancies in the UK and this is exacerbated by the fact that half the workforce will be eligible for retirement by 2020.

The shortage of nursing staff is being compounded by both the removal of student nurses bursaries and the impact of Brexit.

New applications for nursing degree courses slumped by 23 percent after the Tories announced that in the future nurses, midwives and allied health students would have to pay tuition fees of £3,000 per annum, and access student loans to finance their training and living costs.

A 2016 report on the nursing workforce, compiled by the Institute for Employment Studies for Migration, found that 13 percent of nurses in the NHS come from overseas, of which a third are from the European Union—a source which is set to dry up following Brexit.

In recent years, low pay has driven some nurses to take on extra shifts doing agency work—readily available because of the shortage of health service staff. The *Nursing Times* reported that the regulator, NHS

Improvement, with the backing of the Unison union and the RCN, has suspended the proposed introduction of a rule banning permanent NHS staff doing extra agency work. The new rule was to offset mounting costs—providing a profitable niche for private agencies—not the danger to the health and safety of both staff and patients.

The NHS has been deliberately run down, with cuts of £20 billion mapped out by the Brown Labour government in 2010. These were imposed by the 2010 Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. A further £26 billion in “efficiency savings” is to be imposed by 2021 and rolled out as part of Sustainability and Transformation plans. This has resulted in the NHS being described, in the words of the British Red Cross, as facing a “humanitarian crisis.”

This was highlighted by a recent report in the *Guardian*, which claimed it had seen dozens of messages sent by hospitals to doctors asking them to fill rota gaps, which are particularly acute at holiday times. Last month the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford sent emails out to doctors headed “Help,” saying, “I’m practically begging” for cover for the weekend shift to keep departments “safe.”

Because of staff shortages, media reports of patients waiting up to 54 hours in Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments on hospital trolleys, and even dying before they are attended to, are now commonplace. If admitted to hospital, patients’ safety is compromised as staff struggle to provide medication and do observation checks on time.

Ambulance services, which are also facing staff shortages, are at the same time spending more time on the road as they are diverted from A&E departments filled to capacity. This is before the next tranche of cuts closes the doors of one in six A&E departments in England.

The Socialist Equality Party supports the nurses’ fight for better pay and conditions, but warns that such a struggle cannot be won under the leadership of the RCN.

In 2010, Dr. Peter Carter, chief executive and general secretary of the RCN, wrote to the union’s members: “It’s no secret that the NHS needs to save billions of pounds across all four countries of the UK, including at least £20 billion in England alone by 2014—that’s one-fifth of its entire annual budget.” No fight was

proposed against the cuts, with Carter adding, “We want to make sure these savings are achieved in the best possible way—so they don’t affect patient care.”

In 2014, the RCN refused to endorse even those token strikes taken by other health unions. At the union’s annual conference that year, Carter may as well have been speaking on behalf of the Tory Health Secretary as he warned nurses, “If you’re a nurse, it [striking] means abandoning your patients—leaving those babies in the neonatal unit—cancelling that visit to an elderly patient in the community—walking out of the emergency department, or psychiatric ward.” He added, “However strong your feelings, I know you won’t leave your patients in the lurch. That’s not what you came into this job to do.”

As expected, the union did nothing to mobilise its more than 430,000 members in support of their junior doctor colleagues last year. This played a critical role in their isolation and defeat.

Every part of the NHS is under assault, with workers’ jobs and livelihoods—and the vital services they provide—on the line. As a result of £426,000 in funding cuts, Bournemouth Council is proposing to sack 13 community rehabilitation assistants, who work for the Bournemouth Intermediate Care Service (BICS).

On Sunday, the NHS FightBack campaign, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, is holding a meeting in Bournemouth to discuss the way forward in the fight against the BICS redundancies and the evisceration of the NHS. NHS FightBack calls for the formation of action committees, independent of the unions, to oppose the destruction of the NHS. We urge nurses and other health workers in Dorset to attend this meeting to discuss the way forward.

NHS FightBack public meeting

Sunday, April 23, 2 p.m.

Townsend Youth Centre

Jewell Rd.

Bournemouth, BH8 0LT

For further information visit NHSFightBack.org



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