

Royal College of Nursing union holds rally in London

No answers to attacks on public health care

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Around 2,000 nurses demonstrated outside Parliament on Wednesday—the finale of the Royal College of Nursing’s (RCN) “Summer of Protest” around the “Scrap the Cap” campaign.

Nurses, like other public sector workers, have been subject to a seven-years-long wages cap since 2011. Five years of that saw no pay increase and two years just 1 percent. The cap has resulted in wages dropping between £6,000 and £9,000, according to the RCN.

Wednesday’s protest coincided with the return of MPs to Parliament after the summer break and the first Prime Minister’s Questions session. It was organised to put pressure on MPs to “find out more” about the “Scrap the Cap” campaign at a “drop-in event” hosted by Maria Caulfield, a nurse turned Conservative MP with whom the RCN has been working closely. Caulfield, it should be noted, voted down an amendment to the Queen’s Speech in June to end the cap.

Demonstrators were addressed by various RCN national and regional officials but there were no Members of Parliament or other political figures on the platform. Several speakers alluded to the cap being a political attack by the Tory government, but no political solutions were forthcoming. Instead, appeals were made to the same government to recognise the “value” of nursing and “scrap the cap.”

RCN chief executive and General Secretary Janet Davies declared, “Some of your council members will be going to meet MPs today. They will be taking your message to those people who can make that decision.”

“We’ve been hearing this week that there is a bit of a chink, maybe, and the cap will be lifted,” Davies added. This was a reference to reports that Liz Truss, chief secretary to the Treasury, will send guidance letters to that effect to public sector pay review bodies, including the

National Health Service Pay Review Board, later this month at an estimated cost of £4 billion a year.

This has not come about as a result of concerns about the plight of nurses or other NHS staff but pressure from big business interests, who are concerned about slowing economic growth since the Brexit vote and are lobbying for some sort of reflationary measures.

At the same time, the result of unending austerity is plain to see in the NHS. Some 40,000 nursing posts remain unfilled, with the number likely to increase. University applications for nursing and midwifery courses have dropped 8 percent this summer as a result of the removal of the NHS Student Bursary. A significant drop in European Union workers coming to the UK as a result of Brexit is expected to worsen the NHS staffing crisis.

This week, NHS Providers, the umbrella association for health care trusts in England, warned of greater financial pressure than ever before this coming winter and called for emergency funding of up to £350 million.

The feeble response by the RCN is in stark contrast to the militant mood of nurses.

A parliamentary petition of NHS staff demanding an end to pay restraint attracted more than 106,000 signatures in April this year. In a consultative ballot conducted prior to the RCN’s congress in May, in which 50,000 nurses took part, four out of five voted in favour of a walkout.

Opposed to mobilising their members to oppose the government’s attacks, let alone unifying their struggles with other NHS or public sector workers, the Summer of Action was largely restricted to appeals to MPs and photo opportunities for RCN bureaucrats and union officials making occasional media appearances.

The RCN, alongside the health unions, have stood by as the NHS has been deliberately run down, beginning with

the 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.

In 2014, the RCN refused to endorse even those token strikes taken by other health unions and last year did nothing to mobilise its members in support of their junior doctor colleagues, playing 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—under threat. To prevent its destruction, the NHS FightBack campaign, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, calls for the formation of action committees, independent of the unions, to unite health workers across Britain and in Europe and internationally, who face the same onslaught on jobs, wages and services.

At the rally SEP members spoke to nurses about this perspective and distributed the *World Socialist Web Site* article: “Macron’s labour decrees in France: A new stage in the international social counter-revolution.”

Michaela, a nurse from London, came back to speak to our reporters after reading the WSWWS leaflet. She said, “Your leaflet really explains the seriousness of the situation that faces us. I like the words ‘social counter-revolution.’ That is what we are going through here. It makes you think how useless the RCN is. They haven’t got any answer to what is happening. The speeches today so far have been pathetic. They only talk about the problems facing nurses. They don’t even mention the rest of the NHS, let alone what is happening in France or the rest of the world. You wouldn’t think we could all be blown up because of the situation in Korea.

“The RCN thinks the more you shout ‘Scrap the Cap,’ the more the MPs will listen to us. But all this shouting and trying to whip up an atmosphere is a smokescreen for them doing nothing. They have small minds, totally inadequate for dealing with the counter-revolution you are talking about.

“For years the RCN has told us to write to our MPs, that we were getting support from them and things would change. But they haven’t. It’s got worse. One of the speakers said if the government didn’t scrap the cap the RCN would consider a strike. I don’t believe that will ever happen. And if the miracle did happen, what good would a strike do? Look what happened to the junior doctors.

“I think your leaflet has a good idea when it says

committees in workplaces and local neighbourhoods are needed and they should be independent of the unions. And it is good your party is putting that idea out. I have never seen it before.”

Charlotte, who works for NHS North Devon, said she came to the demonstration because “I have the opportunity today to voice the future of NHS and future of nursing. I have come to join my fellow nursing colleagues to campaign against the 1 percent pay cap. Nurses haven’t had a pay rise for many years.”

“I think we need to fight against this government’s attacks on NHS and our wages. This rally shows that there is an appetite to fight back.” Asked what she thought of the RCN’s proposals, she said, “We pay our subscription for the unions. They should be voicing concerns as much as we are. It goes beyond just nurses protesting against their wages. All the public sector workers should be involved in this fight.”

Patricia, an NHS nurse from Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board in Wales, said, “They are closing wards in Swansea. There are not enough nurses for the patients in the hospitals. Patient waiting lists have gone through the roof.

“To become an MP you don’t need any qualification and yet they are paid £74,000 a year, excluding other benefits. We have been on a pay freeze since the last years of the Labour government.

“All the unions fell for a pay cut because there was an economic crisis. They let the government continue with it saying that it was only for a year or two. The government awarded themselves 11 percent. We get nothing. The government gets exactly what they need. Not enough nurses, not enough doctors. They want the NHS to fail.”

For further information visit NHS FightBack.



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