

NHS FightBack: Reject health trade unions' sellout NHS pay deal!

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and NHS FightBack call on the more than 1 million National Health Service (NHS) workers to reject the sellout pay deal being pushed by 12 health trade unions in collusion with the Conservative government.

The agreement is being touted as finally ending the 1 percent pay cap that has been in place for nearly a decade. Via the pay cap and a pay freeze before that, health workers have suffered a real term 14 percent cut in their pay, losing thousands of pounds, since 2010.

The proposed agreement does nothing to address this shortfall. In reality it is a further pay cut. Health workers are to receive a minimum 6.5 percent pay “rise” split across three years. This year they will receive 3 percent, just 1.7 percent and a 1.1 percent lump sum in April 2019, and 1.7 percent from April 2020.

This is a full percentage point lower than the current consumer price inflation rate of 2.7 percent. It is almost 2 percent lower than the RPI measure of inflation, currently at 3.6 percent. The estimated increase in RPI of 9.6 percent over the next three years dwarfs the basic pay increase of 6.5 percent.

The unions are seeking to sweeten the deal by stating that it offers some of the lowest paid NHS staff rises of up to 29 percent over three years—with “hospital caterers, cleaners, porters and other staff on the lowest pay grade” receiving “an immediate pay rise of over £2,000 this year (an increase of between 11 and 13 percent).”

This still leaves NHS workers badly underpaid. The unions acknowledge that even after this increase “every NHS worker in England is to be paid at least £8.93 an hour.” This is just 18p above the real so-called living wage of £8.75—equivalent to take-home pay of just £15,154. After three years, this will rise to just £15,525.

The deal also removes a number of annual pay increments already in place.

The deal is so shameful that the GMB felt obliged to urge rejection in order to shield itself from criticism by its some 22,000 members in the NHS. The union tweeted, without criticising those recommending it, “The deal would mean a real terms pay cut for the most loyal, longest-serving NHS workers. Since 2010 paramedics have lost on average £14,000, midwives £18,000 & staff nurses £14,500...” It concluded by alluding to the role of the unions in collaborating in previous sellouts over pay, stating, “Enough is enough: we can’t recommend any more cuts.”

The 12 unions have said that they will “consult with their members over the pay offer,” with results of a ballot known in June. But they are holding a gun to their members’ heads on behalf of the Conservative government. Their statement concluded with the threat, “If they’re [the pay proposals] not accepted, the NHS pay increase for 2018/19 will be determined through the usual mechanism, and be based on NHS pay review body recommendations.”

In other words, “Accept the sellout, or get the 1 percent pay cut that has been in place for years that we, the union, have done nothing to challenge!”

The second far-reaching attack contained in the deal is that it stipulates that all NHS workers will be subject to “appraisals” before being allowed “to progress to the next pay point.”

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt hailed the deal in parliament as a “something for something” agreement, which brings in “profound changes in productivity in exchange for significant rises in pay.”

Only the first part of his statement is true.

Hunt boasted that the deal would enforce “some of the most important changes to working practices in a

decade” and will “put appraisal and personal development at the heart of pay progression with often automatic incremental pay replaced by larger, less frequent pay increases based on the achievement of agreed professional milestones.”

The agreement was finalised behind the backs of NHS workers with the *Guardian* reporting negotiations were carried out “in conditions of strict secrecy.” It only came to light via a leak to the *Guardian* that, at one stage in the negotiations, the government was demanding that NHS workers give up one day of their annual holidays. This was removed from the final deal, conveniently enabling the unions to claim a victory!

NHS workers already routinely work unpaid overtime to compensate for chronic staff shortages created by years of underfunding. Last year, a survey by the Royal College of Nurses (RCN)—one of the unions that signed the new pay deal—concluded that a “conservative estimate is that the additional unpaid time worked by registered nurses in the NHS across the UK equates to £396 million annually.” Many hospital workers already work during their annual leave as they are forced to work extra days to keep their heads above water.

The union’s proposed deal is only the latest in an unbroken series of betrayals of struggles against pay cuts and attacks on NHS front line services under successive Labour and Tory governments. The prime example was their sabotage of 50,000 junior doctors’ struggle in 2016.

The doctors struck repeatedly against the demands of the Tories that they work under a vastly inferior contract. The trade unions, backed by their allies in the Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Party, ensured the struggle was kept isolated—with not a single other health trade union mobilising its members. It was defeated, with the government’s terms accepted by the British Medical Association.

Yet again, Labour is lending its support to attacks on health service workers and is fully endorsing an agreement even the GMB felt compelled to oppose. Corbyn gave his personal backing by retweeting messages from Shadow Treasury and Shadow Health secretaries, Peter Dowd and Jon Ashworth. Dowd concealed the blatant fact that the agreement represents a further pay cut, claiming, “Labour, NHS staff and trade unions have won a pause on cuts to the pay of our dedicated NHS staff.”

Earlier this month, 40,000 striking lecturers revolted against a sellout deal—just as rotten as that which the health unions are recommending—negotiated by the University and College Union with University UK management.

NHS workers must reject the pay sellout and prepare strike action alongside other public sector workers in dispute, including the lecturers—who are set to embark on a further round of industrial action over Easter—and local government workers who are currently being balloted over a paltry pay offer.

In order to defeat the government and NHS employers’ diktats, NHS staff must act and organise *independently of the trade unions* and establish rank-and-file committees to unite with all other workers coming under ferocious attack. On this basis, a powerful joint offensive can be established of NHS workers, local government staff, education workers and employees throughout the public sector.



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