

UK National Health Service pay deal fuels growing rebellion against unions

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The coming to light of the real details of the pay deal brokered by the main National Health Service unions has fuelled opposition among health workers.

Members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) launched a petition to call an Emergency General Meeting (EGM) against the pay deal signed in March and denounced the union leaders who agreed it. They secured far more than the 1,000 signatures necessary within a few hours.

The petition states that workers have “no confidence in the current leadership of the Royal College of Nursing and call for them to stand down.”

“As members we feel misled. It has come to our attention after the vote closed, that those not at the top of their band will get on average 1.5% until their incremental date. Furthermore, for years two and three of the deal funding will not come from the treasury as was first stated during the RCN consultation.

“Our livelihoods and the future of patient care are at stake and we deserve answers from those who represent us.”

Hundreds of NHS workers used social media platforms to denounce the unions’ collaboration with the government to impose yet another pay cut on over a million staff over the next three years. One said, “They told us this ‘pay deal’ would solve all our problems. I’m completely underwhelmed they misrepresented it completely. I’ve had a disappointing 31p pay rise. I’ll try not to spend it all at once.”

The last eight years have seen the lowest ever funding increase for the NHS in its 70 years existence and the continued implementation of billions in “efficiency savings” at the expense of patient care and pay, terms and conditions.

Contrary to the claims of the unions that the “increase in the NHS pay bill over the three years won’t have to

come from existing budgets,” RCN members are rightly concerned that even this measly increase will be funded through continued decimation of patient care services.

Health workers have experienced a 14 percent cut to their real wages through pay freezes and pay caps imposed by Conservative-led governments over the last eight years. The unions were complicit in these attacks, along with the cutting of front-line services and growing privatization of the NHS. Only last week it was announced that just one firm, Richard Branson’s Virgin Care, has won almost £2 billion in NHS contracts.

Even if health workers receive the full pay rise of 6.5 percent as claimed by the unions, it is still a real-term pay cut, as the estimated combined Retail Price Index rise for next three years will be at 9.6 percent and the erosion of real wages runs at more than 14 percent.

Under the unions’ supposed “best deal in eight years,” many workers will receive only a 1.5 percent pay rise until their incremental pay progression, with future pay progression tied to performance. Health workers are not entitled to annual increments as before. Sickness absence enhancements of low-paid workers will be slashed.

Thanks to the unions, the government had already managed to get rid of sickness absence enhancements, accelerated pay progression and recruitment and retention premium for many health workers—including nurses, midwives, physiotherapists and paramedics—in a deal struck in 2012.

The current pay deal will also see unsocial hours payments amount reduced by several percentage points for workers on band 1-3 of the Agenda for Change pay system.

Thirteen NHS unions signed up to the latest rotten

deal. The RCN sold it to its 432,000 members with claims that “it will amount to an increase of at least 6.5% over three years, but much more for some members, up to 29%.”

Pushing for acceptance, the RCN said that every member would get a 3 percent pay rise this July, backdated from April.

Unison is the largest public sector union. Its head of health and lead pay negotiator for the NHS unions, Sara Gorton, said the deal “would go a long way towards making dedicated health staff feel more valued, lift flagging morale, and help turn the tide on employers’ staffing problems.”

The unions warned that if the pay proposals were not accepted, NHS pay for 2018/19 would be determined based on NHS pay review body recommendations. Lora Allford, chair of the RCN trade union committee, said, “Failure to accept it will put us back to square one, and at risk of returning to the 1% pay rises we’ve fought so hard to overturn.”

NHS FightBack, established by the Socialist Equality Party, called on workers to reject the deal. Having read the NHS Fightback article on the *World Socialist Web Site*, “NHS trade unions’ ‘best deal in eight years’ revealed as a fraud,” Matt, a nurse in Bournemouth, said, “I like that you correctly say that this is a dirty deal. As an RCN member, I have taken part in several rallies and demonstrations in defending the NHS and demanding to scrap the pay cap of NHS workers. I feel betrayed. This is actually a pay cut. All the unions who fed us misinformation to strike this deal are responsible for their actions.”

Anna, a nurse at Royal Bournemouth Hospital, said. “I am a member of Unison. They kept sending me letters and emails asking me to vote for the deal. I knew that this was a sell-out deal because even according to them we have had a 14 percent pay cut over the last seven years, so I binned their letters.

“From this month, I have got 22 pence more to my hourly rate. When we got this month’s pay slip we were comparing how much more each one of us got—13p more was the lowest and 40p was the highest. But my colleague who got the highest increase was at the top of her pay band for several years. This is a total disgrace!”

In an attempt to placate angry members, RCN Chief Executive and General Secretary Janet Davis made an

apology to members by letter. But the insincerity of her statement was evident in the RCN’s insistence they would not reopen the deal.

Brian Murphy, chair of the RCN’s Health Practitioner Committee, issued a letter last week stating, “There will be an opportunity for members to discuss those findings and recommendations at an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) which will take place at the end of September/beginning of October...”

“Meanwhile I want to reassure you that the communications about the pay deal were sent in good faith. Council is determined to get to the bottom of what went wrong and I can assure you that your Council will do everything we can to regain your confidence and support.”

Unison Assistant General Secretary Christina McAnea was angered that Davis even apologised. She said, “The pay deal was indeed complex, but it appears that the RCN general secretary had neither read nor understood the offer. It’s unfortunate that one person’s seeming lack of understanding has unleashed such an unhelpful and completely unnecessary wave of confusion for NHS staff.”

NHS workers are involved in a fight on two fronts. They are fighting a government hell-bent on the destruction of the NHS and health unions through which this plan is being imposed. We urge health workers to contact NHS FightBack to discuss the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. On this basis, a powerful joint offensive can be established of NHS workers, local government staff, education workers and employees throughout the public sector.

For further information visit: nhsfightback.org and facebook.com/Fight4theNHS



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact