

Royal College of Nursing leadership in UK seeks re-election in defiance of no confidence vote

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Making a mockery of September's no confidence vote by members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), most of the existing leadership of the union is seeking re-election to the governing council.

The RCN Council stood down at the September 28 Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM), stating that a vote of no confidence was "advisory," but the "Council recognises the moral weight of the vote, and has acted accordingly."

It called new elections for a new council to be put in place, but 10 out of 12 previous RCN council members put their names forward as candidates. These are the same people who deliberately sold a rotten pay offer as the "best deal in eight years" and were the subject of members' outrage when the real details of the deal came to light in July.

The RCN then gave members only four days to make any objections to nominations they have put forward. Some members reported to NHS FightBack that they had not even received emails regarding the council elections nominations. Nor were they informed about the branch meetings in which members could select their own nominees.

Among those standing is the chair of the RCN Council, Maria Trewern. Making a worthless apology to members during the EGM, she said, "When dealing with the pay deal, the organisation did make mistakes and did not listen well enough to the issues raised by members." She asked for a "second chance" for the council as it had "taken action" and set up an "independent review" to find out what went wrong with union's "communication."

These apologies were rejected by RCN members, with the motion reading that they had "no confidence in the current leadership of the Royal College of Nursing and call for them to stand down." The motion was passed by a

huge majority, receiving 11,156 (78.1 percent) votes in favour, 3,124 (21.9 percent) against, with 1,112 members abstaining. RCN members at the EGM lined up to condemn the union leaders for providing misleading and wrong information. Moreover, calling the EGM was forced on the RCN Council after a petition against the leadership was launched as soon as the details of the March pay deal became apparent in July's pay slips and received more than 1,000 signatures within 24 hours.

The RCN had agreed what was in effect a pay cut to its 435,000 members, while claiming that "it will amount to an increase of at least 6.5 percent over three years, but much more for some members, up to 29 percent."

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

As a rebellion against them grew, RCN's Chief Executive and General Secretary Janet Davies stepped down in August under mutually agreed terms with the rest of the leadership. The resignation of RCN's director of member relations, Chris Cox, followed. Now, RCN's chief pay negotiator Josie Irwin has announced her resignation, but only after reserving another spot high up in the trade union bureaucracy for herself. In appreciation of her role in securing a sell-out deal for RCN members and other health workers, Unison, the largest public sector union, will appoint Irwin as its national women's officer.

Unison played its own critical role in portraying the sell-out as a good deal. It even devised a "pay calculator" for use on the union's website that was later found by an Electoral Reform Services investigation of the deal to have misled members. The ERS established that the

calculator “was not able to relay the nuances of the deal” and therefore was not able to provide sufficient detail to members on how the deal would be implemented and affect pay packets in the short term.”

Once health workers found out how bad the deal was, Unison Assistant General Secretary Christina McAnea denounced Davies for having the temerity to even issue an apology to RCN members. Davies, McAnea declared, “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.”

It has since emerged that Unison has reportedly suspending one of its own National Executive members, Karen Reissmann, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party, who called on health workers to reject the pay deal. Last week, the Nursing Notes web site published an internal Unison e-mail from staff opposing the attack on Reissmann and others who spoke out against the deal. It stated, “We note that Karen Reissmann is currently suspended from office in Unison. She is a member of Unison’s National Executive, and National Health Service Group Executive. She has been outspoken about the NHS pay deal, stating she believes NHS workers could have done better from this weak government and that Unison materials were misleading to members. We are concerned these views and her suspension are linked.

“We are aware branches were threatened with disciplinary action if they opposed the NHS pay deal.

“We are opposed to disciplinary action being threatened or instigated against individuals or branches for simply expressing a different view from the national leadership on issues that affect members or for campaigning amongst membership to alter UNISON policy on any issues.”

Reissmann was victimised, even though she has been a loyal figure within the Unison bureaucracy for years. Under conditions in which Unison saw the implications of a growing rebellion by health workers, following that earlier this year by thousands of lecturers against the University and Colleges Union leadership, it moved to silence even this timid voice.

Opposed to any struggle against the union bureaucracy of which they themselves constitute a significant faction, the SWP refuses to wage a serious campaign to fight the attack on Reissmann.

Reissmann’s own twitter account makes no reference at all to the events. The SWP initially responded equivocally. Even though the internal email states that

Reissmann has been suspended, a brief 302-word article on the Socialist Worker web site stated in response, “If it is true that Karen has been suspended from holding office, the Unison leadership should immediately lift her suspension and withdraw any disciplinary action.”

Only on Tuesday morning did the SWP acknowledge that Reissmann has been suspended and call for her reinstatement, noting that “solidarity is growing for a nurse and leading union activist who has been suspended from holding office in the Unison union.”

In doing so, the SWP maintain their full allegiance to the union bureaucracy, with the article concluding with a call that the “leaders of the 13 health unions should reopen the deal and fight to get more from this weak government.”

Events since March confirm that the trade unions are not organisations that fight in defence of workers but are bureaucratic shells that exist to reward a handful of careerists who work on behalf of management and corporations. They will not be reformed by rank-and-file pressure but will only turn more ruthlessly against their members.

Workers need to take matters into their own hands. Opposition to the union leaders, and their pseudo-left backers, must be organised based on a socialist strategy. This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, democratically elected and independent of the union apparatus, by health workers to unify public and private sector workers against the government’s onslaught against their livelihoods and in defence of the right to free, universal health care.

We urge health workers to contact NHS FightBack, established by the Socialist Equality Party to discuss these vital issues, and take the struggle forward. To contact, visit nhsfightback.org and facebook.com/Fight4theNHS.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact