National Health Service workers among increasing users of food banks in Britain

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Details have emerged on the use of food vouchers by National Health Service (NHS) staff in the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) and the Ulster Hospital, both in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

The Unison trade union distributed vouchers for use at food banks to staff who are struggling to pay bills and buy food. In the last weeks of October, 12 workers were referred to local food banks by the Unison branch.

The revelations came a month after many health sector workers in Belfast were not paid in full, due to an issue at the centralised Business Services Organisation—a subsidiary company that manages numerous aspects of health sector work in Northern Ireland.

Conor McCarthy, Unison trade union branch secretary at the RVH, said, "People like cleaners and porters are now just paying bills and no more." In describing the use of food banks, McCarthy added, "This [the use of food banks] is new and I suspect there'll be a stigma that people will have to overcome."

On November 6, the *Guardian* published an interview with Geraldine Curran, a hospital cleaner who works at the Royal Belfast Hospital and has been employed by the NHS for 19 years. Curran is paid the paltry national minimum wage of £7.83—under the still miserly £9-per-hour real "living wage." The real living wage is set by the Living Wage Foundation to benchmark the supposed minimum required to cover people's basic needs.

Curran acknowledged that she has had to use her local food bank at least six times over the last year, but due to the stigma she had not even revealed this to her two school-aged children. Forty-eight percent of children in West Belfast live below the poverty line.

Expressing the financial constraints that afflict an ever-increasing number of the working poor across the country and internationally, she said, "I take home £220 a week. But my mortgage is £700 a month. Then there's the food, electric, gas and rates." Spelling out the Dickensian conditions facing growing sections of the working class, she added, "At the moment I'm having to choose between food and heating. Sometimes we put blankets on or we go to bed early so we're under the quilt."

The situation in Northern Ireland is particularly acute, as even a paltry pay deal rammed through this year in the public sector has yet to be implemented due to the lack of a government in Stormont—which collapsed in January 2017.

This is hardly the first time that the use of food banks by NHS workers has come up. In June, while discussing the single "Won't Let Go"—a protest song released by the National Health Singers for the 70th anniversary celebrations—Dr. Georgina Wood, one of the founders of the singers, said of the state of the NHS, "We see the reality of this every day. The service is on its knees, doctors are committing suicide, nurses are using food banks and patients are having an awful time."

This backs up the findings released by United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston on extreme poverty following his recent visit to the UK. He noted, "Low wages, insecure jobs, and zero-hour contracts mean that even at record unemployment there are still 14 million people in poverty. … Jobs aren't even a guarantee against people needing food banks. The Trussell Trust told me that one in six people referred to their food banks is in work. One pastor said, 'The majority of people using our food bank are in work. … Nurses and teachers are accessing food banks.' "

In October 2016, a study by Unison highlighted the precarious nature of work in the health service. From a

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survey of 21,000 health workers, 49 percent said that they had to seek financial help from friends and family in the previous year. Eleven percent of respondents had pawned their own possessions and 10 percent had used a pay-day loan. Almost one in five said they had taken on additional work—outside of their existing jobs—to supplement their finances. Most notably, the survey found that 1 percent of respondents had resorted to using food banks.

The use of food banks has rapidly increased across the UK in the last half-decade. According to figures published by the Trussell Trust charity that runs many food banks, in 2013 the number of three-day emergency food supplies distributed stood at 355,982. The figure has more than doubled over the last five years to reach 658,048 as of September 2018, in the last year alone rising 13 percent. While benefit delays were attributable to 21.6 percent of food bank users and a further 17.1 percent were due to benefit changes, the largest share of users was those on low incomes, at 30.71 percent.

Also interviewed by the *Guardian* was Darren Hanley, who works in the sterilising department for surgical instruments. Hanley earns £7.83 an hour, working for an outsourcing company (Mitie). He said, "You literally live from month to month. If you can make it on the next pay day you breathe a sigh of relief and carry on." Hanley said he previously had to borrow money from his 80-year-old mother when he's been on sick leave, to pay his bills and afford food. Others interviewed described how they had been holding off from using the heating—despite the cold—as they know it's not something they can afford.

The conditions for workers across the UK stand in stark contrast with the proclamations of the Conservative government that "austerity is over." Recent studies show that 28 percent of public sector workers are paid less than the previous real living wage of £8.75. Nearly half (46 percent) of those who work in social care, both in private and public sectors, earn less than the living wage.

Many of these have experienced using a food bank. According to the Trussell Trust, one in six people in employment has used one of its food banks. Over the last year, the Trust gave out a record 1,332,952 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis.

The trade unions, despite their occasional hullabaloo over such conditions, have worked hand-in-glove with the employers to ensure that the only "increases" health service workers see are in the number of rotten sell-out deals used to shut down strike action and a fightback. In March, 13 of the 14 unions in the health sector promoted a rotten pay deal—marketed as the "best deal in eight years"—in an attempt to enforce a sellout. When workers found out, in their pay packets, that the deal was in reality a pay cut, they passed a vote of no confidence in the Royal College of Nurses (RCN) leadership, who were forced to stand down in September.

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