

UK: Half of Royal College of Nursing leadership re-elected after being forced out

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Six of the 12 members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) leadership Council forced to step down from their positions in September have been re-elected.

These despised union functionaries exploited the widespread disengagement of members with the union to secure re-election, despite their role in selling a rotten three-year pay deal to National Health Service (NHS) workers. Turnout among the RCN's membership of 430,000 members ranged from as low as 4.8 percent to 8.3 percent in different regions.

Maria Trewern, the former chair, and three others of the council who endorsed the sell-out pay deal to the members and contested for another term were voted out.

Members were asked to participate in a thoroughly undemocratic election process and had only four days to make objections to nominations. Some nurses and health care assistants told NHS FightBack that they had not even received emails about the nominations. Nor were some members informed about branch meetings in which they could select their own nominees.

Knowing that half of the council elected were people who were forced out in September, acting RCN Chief Executive Dame Donna Kinnair said, "The field of candidates was exceptionally strong and the College is fortunate to attract people with such broad experience to these top roles."

Offering her personal gratitude to the council members forced out, she said that "they are a credit to nursing and our organisation."

The re-elected union functionaries played a crucial role in selling the pay deal to their members after conspiring with other unions and the government. The RCN and 13 other health unions, including the largest public sector union Unison, were in negotiations with the Conservative government since the end of 2017,

finally reaching a pay deal in March this year. The RCN and the unions sold it as "the best deal in eight years" and bombarded members with misleading information to get a favourable vote.

Pushing for acceptance, the RCN claimed, "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" and that every member would get a 3 percent pay rise this July, backdated from April. It warned that if the pay proposals were not accepted, NHS pay for 2018/19 would be determined based on NHS pay review body recommendations—a well below inflation 1 percent offer.

The unions concealed the real facts:

- A 6.5 percent pay "increase" over three years is a real-term wage cut, as the estimated combined Retail Price Index inflation hike in that period will be 9.6 percent. Moreover, health workers, like other public sector workers, have seen their pay eroded by 14 percent over the last eight years as a result of pay caps and pay freezers implemented by Tory-led governments with the tacit support of the unions.

- Future pay progression is tied to performance. Former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt welcomed the deal as imposing "profound changes in productivity."

- Sickness absence enhancements of low-paid workers will be slashed and unsocial hours payments amounts will go down by several percentage points for workers on band 1-3 of the Agenda for Change pay system.

- Many workers will receive only a 1.5 percent pay rise until their incremental pay progression.

As soon as the concealed details of the pay deal came to light in July pay packets, health workers expressed outrage. Many condemned the unions on social media platforms and in work places, while RCN members put

forward a petition calling for an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM). More than 1,000 signatures required for an EGM were gained within 24 hours.

RCN Chief Executive and General Secretary Janet Davies was forced to step down in August. The resignations of RCN's director of member relations Chris Cox and chief pay negotiator Josie Irwin followed.

A motion of no confidence "in the current leadership of the Royal College of Nursing" calling for them to "stand down" was passed overwhelmingly. Delegates from across the country lined up during the EGM held in September to denounce the union bureaucracy.

The RCN council stood down, stating that a vote of no confidence was "advisory" but the "Council recognises the moral weight of the vote, and has acted accordingly."

Such moral concerns were soon set aside, as 10 members of the council put themselves forward for re-election a month after they were thrown out.

The RCN bureaucrats are on record that the pay deal will not be re-opened. Indeed, the RCN and other unions are working with the devolved governments on similar deals in Scotland and Wales.

Recognising the resurgence of the class struggle in the last year that has seen struggles by university lecturers and administrators, college workers and teachers, the union bureaucracy is moving to deepen collaboration with the employers to suppress growing opposition to attacks on jobs, wages and pensions.

The health unions are trying to head off growing anger of health and social care workers in Northern Ireland who have not received a pay award at all. Despite a consultative ballot of the members indicating that 92-98 percent of health and social care workers support a formal ballot for industrial action, the unions are doing nothing other than demand further talks with the Department of Health.

A joint statement of the unions, including the RCN, declares: "Good policies are made when Departmental officials, employers and Trade Unions work together in the best interest of the public and staff."

The experience of the RCN members shows that the unions cannot be reformed by rank-and-file pressure. Such pressure only results in the union leadership turning even more ruthlessly against the interests of their members.

NHS workers are involved in a fight on two fronts—against a government hell-bent on the destruction of the NHS and against the health unions through which these plans are 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 and private sector in defence of jobs, wages and essential services.

Contact and support the NHS FightBack campaign initiated by the Socialist Equality Party.

Visit nhsfightback.org and facebook.com/Fight4theNHS

The author recommends:

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[3 October 2018]

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