

Unison calls off Bradford hospital workers' strike

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After voting for indefinite strike action from August 26, the struggle of Bradford hospital workers has been sabotaged by the Unison trade union.

A joint statement, issued on August 22 by hospital managers and Unison regional organiser Natalie Ratcliffe, records that “following constructive talks” at the government-sponsored Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) the union “agreed to suspend indefinite industrial action due to commence on August 26.”

Health workers in Bradford have been fighting a major cost-cutting exercise as hospital managers sought to establish a “wholly owned subsidiary” (WOS) into which porters, kitchen, security staff and others would be placed as part of measures to achieve £16 million a year in “efficiency savings.”

The workers rejected management “promises” that their NHS pay and conditions would be “protected” for up to twenty-five years and voted in early June by 97 percent to support an all-out strike following a series of shorter stoppages and protests.

Behind the scenes, the union and management had been meeting in a desperate bid to get the strike called off and agree a negotiated settlement—preserving the position of the union bureaucracy as an industrial police force.

The Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has agreed “not to proceed with the October 1 transfer date” into the wholly owned subsidiary. Unison will present its case to a meeting of the management board on September 12, with a new transfer date of February 15, 2020.

Several press outlets, including the local *Telegraph and Argus*, have tried to present the postponement as a “climb-down” by management. Nothing could be further from the truth. The contents of a “private and

confidential” letter from the union show why management have been only too willing to put back the transfer.

The August 16 letter from Unison regional head of health, Tony Pearson, gives the bosses everything they want, and more. It not only agrees to the creation of a smaller WOS but a means of transferring staff who oppose the WOS through a “retention of employment model.”

“This would allow a significant minority of staff within estates and clinical engineering, who appear to support the transfer, to move to the new company leaving the option of working with company of secondment to the majority of staff who opposed the transfer.”

Unison spends the first half of the letter showing in detail why management pledges to uphold NHS terms and conditions in any WOS are not worth the paper they are written on. Then in a 180-degree about turn, it responds to management “concerns about a two-tier workforce” that would emerge following the union proposal with the cynical statement, “If the Trust is sincere as regards its intentions on terms and conditions, I would suggest this should be more of a worry to Unison.”

The only “worry” for Unison is not its members’ jobs in any WOS—abandoning all talk of “backdoor privatisation” and extolling the “potential income streams” such a set up might generate—but that it retain its seat at the negotiating table, “to allow for proper ways to resolve the dispute.”

To make sure this proceeds smoothly, Unison promises a “significant pause... with a suspension of industrial action.”

The Socialist Equality Party intervened in the dispute, warning workers on the picket lines that such an

outcome was being cooked up by the unions. In response, the union bureaucracy tried to create a hostile environment against the SEP, with one representative accusing our members of being “scabs...on the management payroll.”

On August 15, the WSWs warned, “When Unison head of health Sara Gorton told Bradford strikers, ‘your jobs are important. Your union is behind you,’ her words should be measured against the record of betrayal and inaction by the trade unions.” The health unions have sold out every major struggle of their members over the last decade, from the 2011-12 pensions struggle, the 2016 junior doctors national strike, and the betrayal by Unison and 12 other unions of the 2017 national dispute over pay.

The latest sell-out in Bradford could not have proceeded without the wretched support extended to the bureaucracy by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Socialist Party (SP) and other pseudo-left outfits, who all wrote glowing articles about the “fightback” being organised by Unison.

At the beginning of the dispute in July, the SP wrote, “That Unison is taking sustained action also encouraged non-union members to join the strike with several previously unorganised workers on the picket lines.” It wrote breathlessly on August 14 that “Unison should mobilise its membership and the wider trade union movement, particularly in the NHS, to a national demonstration in Bradford in support of the strike on the first or second Saturday of all out strike action.”

Two days before the strike was called off, the SP’s National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN)—a front for sections of the trade union bureaucracy to masquerade as “building the rank and file”—wrote, “The determination of the strikers must now be matched by drawing the might of the wider labour movement into this battle...”

Without saying anything about the content of the rotten deal agreed by Unison, the SP/NSSN’s Rob Williams then posted up on Facebook links to BBC and local newspaper articles announcing that the strike has been called off.

The SWP finally responded to the sell-out by publishing an article online yesterday, providing yet another rotten apology for the union bureaucracy. After claiming that health bosses had “backed off from plans to outsource hundreds of jobs,” the article states, “The

decision to suspend the action followed what Unison described as ‘constructive talks’ at the Acas conciliation service.” In their role as a propaganda arm of the bureaucracy, the SWP then faithfully published the “joint statement by Unison and bosses.”

The SWP presents the suppression of the strike by the Unison bureaucracy as if it was a victory for the workers, who have been betrayed. “The suspensions [of the transfers] shows that strikes that are longer than one-day have the power to make bosses think twice,” they write. “They [the hospital trust] would not have backed off if workers hadn’t struck for three weeks in July and August and then threatened an indefinite walkout.”

The piece concludes, “Bradford bosses might try to use this period to break the momentum of the workers’ action. If they refuse to drop the outsourcing plans altogether, Unison should immediately name the date for an indefinite strike.”

Who is the SWP trying to fool? A date had already been named for an indefinite strike before it was called off precisely in order to give the “Bradford bosses” and Unison the time they both need to “break the momentum of workers’ action.”

Hospital workers in Bradford can place no confidence in Unison to defend their jobs, pay and conditions, nor in the fake lefts, who are the union bureaucracy’s cheerleaders. They must not stand by as Unison demobilises their struggle. An urgent discussion must begin among the rank and file to take the fight out of the hands of the bureaucracy by forming an independent committee of trusted militants. Workers must implement their vote to strike and turn to other health workers in Bradford and throughout the UK, who are facing the same fight to defend their wages, terms and conditions in opposition gutting and privatisation of the NHS.

The Socialist Equality Party urges Bradford health workers to urgently contact the SEP’s NHS FightBack campaign to discuss the way forward in this fight.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)