

Scottish care workers speak out against conditions and treatment during COVID-19 crisis

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The COVID-19 crisis has compounded already abysmal working conditions facing health and care workers. Internationally, capitalist governments have forced essential workers to continue turning up to work without personal protective equipment (PPE) or hazard pay in life-threatening conditions.

In January 2016, it was estimated that in Scotland alone 61,500 adults received support from care workers in the form of daily living and home care, while 36,000 lived in care homes. These 97,500 extremely vulnerable people come into daily contact with key workers who are not supplied with PPE, regardless of isolation or distancing requirements.

Health and social care workers from the Highlands of Scotland spoke to the WSWS about the conditions they are facing.

Ryan, a care worker in Inverness, said of Boris Johnson's government, "The authorities were in denial that this could affect them, and when they couldn't ignore it, they focused more on protecting their own interests under the guise of protecting the economy. While there are experts who know how we should have reacted, those in power were focused on protecting their assets, not people.

"The virus has shown how flawed the system we live under is and proven many excuses given over the years to be lies. Many workers will now be exposed to a welfare system designed to be frustrating and see that they have been taken for mugs for years.

"I think they were critically unprepared due to arrogant complacency. Some saw what was coming and used it as an excuse for quick profit, rather than to warn people or prepare. The ruling class of the UK has spent years cutting away at the NHS [National Health Service] to prepare it for privatisation. It suited them for it to struggle and not be equipped. The ruling class will want to recoup their losses and claim it is necessary while giving empty platitudes and maybe bread and circuses and other token gestures to workers.

"I've no crystal ball so I can't say what the future will bring, but it is very likely to me that we will see revolution of some kind. Workers should respond to this with revolution. They should feel utter outrage. The coronavirus is a tipping point. The world cannot continue as it was. After the pandemic has run its course, our world must change or die."

A nurse from Dingwall wrote: "This virus has been wreaking havoc in China since December. Our government had so much time to prepare and did nothing. I feel that we are on a better track now, but the feeling that the people in charge have been fumbling about in the dark for a month has been frustrating, to say the least.

"Countries like Hong Kong and South Korea have handled this whole pandemic with extraordinary efficiency. That is down to their experience with the SARS epidemic. But bloody hell, it's 2020!

"I could Google what we should be doing to prepare back in December. Why couldn't our government have had a bit of foresight? It's the reason why having public school boys with no health care experience in charge of health care is so incredibly dangerous. It's such a ridiculous setup that we have in this country. I've never understood why it's acceptable.

"As far as health care workers go, Brexit has caused thousands of health professionals to return to their countries of origin. You don't count on a pandemic when you want your British 'blue passport' do you? I would expect the hospitals in England to be feeling this shortage especially."

"We're front line workers, the heroes of the hour. I find it all a bit surreal. I'm just doing what I've done for the past decade, but the feeling of warmth from the general public has been amazing. I was swearing at the TV when I saw Boris clapping outside Number 10 [Downing Street]. His party has brought our health service to its knees for the past 10 years and there he is acting like he's our biggest cheerleader on the 10 o'clock news.

His only concern about the NHS is how his handling of it plays out in the polls. Why would you care about the NHS when you've been signed up to [private medical care company] BUPA since the day you were born?"

"We were not prepared at all for this," the nurse continued. "It's obviously down to Tory cuts. When I started nursing, it was completely different. You felt like you had time to give everyone the care they deserve. Latterly it was all about what beds were available and how quickly we could get patients out.

"It wasn't the management's fault, they were completely in a bind when it came to beds being available. It's all down to funding. Building makeshift hospitals and increasing beds now is all well and good, but we should never have been stripped to the bone in the first place.

"I would like the appropriate PPE. Having to ration face masks is abysmal. We are using face masks with patients who are vulnerable going through chemo, to protect them, not us. And when we get to a patient who is actively coughing, we often don't have enough left. If we were being regularly tested, this wouldn't be an issue. We could go to the vulnerable patients and feel safe that we weren't going to pass it on to them, but we are still just fumbling in the dark.

"Having the general public's mass support is incredibly heartwarming, but we are being used as a political football when it comes to Boris. If we weren't the last line of defence, he wouldn't give a s**t about us. They [Conservative MPs] cheered in parliament when our pay rise was rejected. The public support has been tremendous though. It really helps you put one foot in front of the other as you run towards the fire.

"There isn't enough PPE, there won't be enough staff because of the lack of testing (and lack of PPE). The reports I've read from Italy have been harrowing. I hope and pray that we don't get to the point that Italy and Spain have gotten to.

"Nursing isn't an easy career. We're all coping with this because we've been dealing with terrible situations for our whole careers, admittedly not to the same degree as this pandemic. We will all rise to the challenge because it's what we have always done. We won't forget that they cheered when our pay rise was rejected though. That big red handprint to the face will remain."

Alexander, another Inverness care worker, said, "Workers have been labeled 'key workers' and, as such, have been heavily relied upon. I hope that, once this crisis is over, workers realise the strength that they have when it comes to negotiating better deals for themselves. I believe that the workers have become and will become much more self-aware and take action against what has been an unfair

system for many years.

"I believe that limited supplies of essential medical equipment has always been stockpiled in the event of an emergency, for specific use by the upper class, politicians and the armed forces. In contrast, workers have been treated terribly. I am aware of very few companies that have offered to (financially) alleviate the problems of their workforce who produce their profits. I feel as though workers need to unite, to demand what is fair. I suspect that they will need to ask more than once! Demand fair treatment and fair remuneration and shout it from the rooftops. It is time for a change. Workers organising and uniting would be a good start."

Armrgret, a social worker, explained, "The government was made aware in January 2020 that a health crisis was occurring. They were too busy thinking about Brexit and ignored the health alert and only truly responded in March. That was eight weeks of lost opportunity!

"For social workers' clients, there will be weeks of uncertainty, growing debt, increased emotional fragility, suicides/self-harming, OCD levels may rise, volatility and depression to name but a few symptoms. Those in England who pay for prescriptions won't be able to afford to pay for treatment prevention. Those in multiple occupancy will struggle.

"A cocktail of civil unrest may likely occur. The government will use this opportunity for re-modeling services to save money. After all, every crisis is an opportunity. Internationally, we can see racism always rears its head. Look at the leader of the 'free world' and his comments on China.

"The real picture though is economic collapse. There is no such thing as a free hand out, and everyone will soon know what the true cost will be... The capitalist class internationally thought 'What's the big deal? It's only a few thousand deaths, we won't miss them.'

"If you look at the 2016 health report the UK made, it's clear that we would not be able to manage a pandemic. The erosion of services, massive holes as a result of austerity had destroyed social and health care. There was every intention of selling the remains of the carcass called the NHS. They were even planning on selling children's services. The state wanted a US type model for the UK."



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