

UK: Johnson government opposes pay increase for nurses

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Every Thursday, millions of people have participated in the Clap for Carers in support of health workers, with the overwhelming majority insisting that National Health Service (NHS) workers be given a substantial pay rise.

Boris Johnson and other members of the Tory government outside flapping their arms and hailing nurses and doctors as “heroes” have made clear they are bitterly opposed to any pay rise whatsoever.

On May, 18 Health Secretary Matt Hancock was asked by a member of the public if the government would sanction a nurses’ pay rise amid rumours of a public sector pay freeze. He replied by claiming that nurses have already had a “very significant pay rise.”

He was referring to the meagre 6.5 percent over three years awarded to health care workers in mid-2018. This was a de facto pay cut. Over the preceding eight years, nurses and the other health care workers had seen their pay slashed by nearly 15 percent through inflation and the one percent pay freezes imposed under Conservative austerity. This was carried out with the tacit support of the trade unions.

Hancock claimed, “We put up nurses’ pay last month, and in fact last year we had the fastest rise, the biggest rise in pay—especially for nurses who are starting their career and the lowest paid nurses, who got a very significant pay rise of over 15 percent.

“So there has been a significant pay rise for nurses,” he said, adding another falsehood to his non-stop lies about there being “adequate PPE for frontline staff” and the government providing adequate levels of COVID-19 testing for NHS staff.

Hancock’s claim adds insult to injury to nurses who are facing a life and death struggle to deliver care to patients, including those infected with COVID-19. Such are the dangers facing workers that a Royal

College of Nursing (RCN) survey found that more than a third of nursing staff (34 percent) “say they’re still under pressure to care for patients with possible or confirmed COVID-19 without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).”

The situation is about to get much worse thanks to the ending of the lockdown. Yesterday, Weston General Hospital in Somerset stopped admitting new patients and shut its A&E department after a “spike” in COVID-19 infections. The Weston-Super-Mare facility is carrying out a deep clean.

The government’s criminal indifference to protecting frontline staff had resulted by last week in a death toll of 312 health and social care workers—among the highest number of fatalities of health workers globally. Almost one-third (33 percent) of the nursing and midwifery workforce has reported severe or extremely severe depression, anxiety, or stress.

The NHS was left entirely unprepared to face the pandemic, not only due to the government’s murderous policy of herd immunity but because it had been brought to the point of collapse by years of underfunding and privatization. The NHS has 30,000 fewer beds than 10 years ago and has more than 110,000 unfilled vacancies of staff, including 40,000 nurses.

Hancock’s remarks on nurses’ pay provoked anger among nurses and other health professionals. When *Nursing Notes* reported his remarks on Facebook, hundreds responded.

A nurse, Stephanie-Faith Bates, wrote, “If we survive the virus, why should we have to wait [for a pay increase] when we are putting ours and our families’ lives at risk daily just by going to work... Do not defend a government who has contributed to the killing of over 200 of our brothers and sisters and then had the cheek

to threaten us with a 2 year pay freeze mid pandemic. Totally indefensible.”

Another nurse, Karen Wright, commented, “I certainly have not had a 15% payrise... ever!! Not a scrap near it... but would settle for £10,000 one off [payment] like the MPs though! I bet they don’t worry about going to work and being directly involved with the Coronavirus and maybe taking it home to their family.”

Sarah Hermione Tyrer commented, “The banks, and their business pals have been handed BILLIONS for nothing... So you know, poor people have to wait and hope. They’ve just said there won’t be a pay rise.”

A health care assistant, Jason Wright, wrote, “That’s easy to say for an MP who’s had an above inflation pay rise. I’d be happy with a job that pays 79k + a year too thank you, ohh and not forgetting expenses. I’ve proudly worked in the NHS for 21 years as a HCA earning less than 20k a year. I’m poorer now than I was 20 years ago due to pay freezes and inflation increase in the cost of living!!!”

Eve Crocker wrote, “Lie after lie after lie. The NHS and care sector have saved thousands of lives in these last few months and the Tories want to kick them in the teeth. Why? Because they hoped for even more deaths of the old and sick infirm.”

To save face, the RCN, with a long record of selling out its 430,000 members, sent an email stating that “The majority of nursing staff will not recognise the 15% figure quoted by the UK Secretary of State for Health and Care.”

Its only response, however, was to explain, “Your Council and Executive Team are working together to write to the Prime Minister and UK Secretary to clarify these inaccuracies.”

Nurses were not fooled and many also denounced the RCN. Along with other health unions, the RCN played a crucial role in selling the rotten 2018 pay deal—now hailed by Hancock—to their members. The RCN proclaimed it “the best deal in eight years” and said that “it will amount to an increase of at least 6.5% over three years, but much more for some members, up to 29%.”

When the pay deal was revealed as a total deception, members rebelled and the RCN council had to step down following a no confidence motion by the membership in September 2018.

In response to the RCN, Marie Winterton wrote, “We got 0.5% because the RCN f***** it up. I got 18p extra in a month’s pay, is that significant enough for [Hancock]?”

Gary Beecheno wrote, “Condemnation from the RCN is a bit like a kiss from a great aunt... Unpleasant but not going to kill you... It’s been seen too often to take the side of government over the needs of its members.”

Louise Neesham commented, “er... didn’t the RCN advise that we all accept the latest pay deal saying it was ‘the best we were going to get’. This letter is 3 years too late!!”

Jacqueline Smith wrote, “The RCN condemned the statement? The RCN couldn’t work out what the rise was and advised people to vote for it!!!”

Mandy Bostwick wrote, “Bit delayed RCN!!! I always find they are lack lustre in representing us at best of times.”

Gary Evans commented, “So what are you going to do about it. Flag waving. Strikes in break periods the usual crap I fear.”

Many nurses and health workers understand very well that no faith can be placed in the trade unions to defend their health and safety, pay, terms and conditions. The Socialist Equality Party and the NHS Fightback urge all health workers to now build rank and file safety committees—independent of the unions—to ensure health and safety during the pandemic and to fight for better pay, terms and conditions.



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