

UK nurses from overseas demand permanent residence after battling COVID-19

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party was contacted by an overseas nurse from the south of England, urging support for a petition demanding permanent residence for non-EU National Health Service migrant workers, the scrapping of the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) and an end to the NHS five-year pay freeze. This is what he had to say.

It was not easy to work in the UK during this unprecedented time. The personal protective equipment (PPE) shortage was immense and most of the PPE the government supplied to the NHS had expired. We felt like not enough protection had been provided while caring for COVID-positive patients.

Thousands among us caught the virus. During the pandemic most of the nurses and doctors have been redeployed to meet the demand for Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds running at five and six times the norm. Most of them were not prepared to look after critically ill patients and felt lost. It was more traumatic than catching COVID-19 for many, and they struggled to cope. Some even now have not recovered. We are still in the battlefield and nobody knows when it will be over.

I am one of 170,000 non-British NHS warriors who fought for the UK in the COVID-19 battle, after paying tens of thousands of pounds for the privilege to work for the NHS. We risked our lives and we lost over one hundred among us during this battle.

After five years of our immense effort and fight against the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), which we have been paying since 2015, it was announced that there was going to be a review. On May 20, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that it is a great source of income for the NHS and that he could not wave off the IHS and it must go up from £400 to £625, in October 2020. This was heart-breaking for us. Some even

compared working for the NHS to modern slavery!

A nurse with a family of three children, who had to renew their visa for three years in October, would have to pay a total of £7,575 just for the IHS, in addition to the high visa fees.

There has been no official announcement over scrapping the IHS, so those who need to renew their visa will be forced to pay again with no guarantee of a refund. Nothing is clear after three weeks. There has been a lot of hype with the government and the media telling the public they have done us a great favour. But nothing has been done.

Do you think this is fair? We are fighting for equality. We cannot live like this! Nurses in the UK earn around £18,000 after tax and national insurance contributions, but still are forced to pay 15–20 percent of their salary towards visa fees and the IHS.

The government is not recognising our efforts. And in addition to this there is the five-year pay freeze for all NHS workers. We cannot afford to raise the 10 percent deposit to buy a house, so we must rent privately. Due to immigration laws, those on visas cannot rent council houses under the “no recourse to public funds” clause. I pay £800 per month for a one-bedroom property. On top of this is the Council Tax and other bills. Like many overseas workers, I am unable to keep up with sending money back home to help my family. I know that many overseas NHS workers are considering going abroad because it has become impossible to live.

Many of my NHS colleagues were not even aware of the IHS before the pandemic hit. The government should appreciate all health care workers’ contributions by raising their pay, rather than keeping the pay freeze for the public sector. Immigrant workers must be offered automatic indefinite leave to remain, with the choice of citizenship. The latter may not be suitable for

everyone.

This is what the petition by Dr Gill Sare is appealing for. We are not being listened to and this must change. I call on all UK residents to sign the petition and support the fight to grant NHS workers, who are European Union and other nationals, automatic UK citizenship. This should also include those in social care, who have lost many lives. It is not just in the NHS.



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