

Britain's National Health Service workers demand pay rise amid COVID-19 crisis

Rory Woods
7 August 2020

National Health Service (NHS) workers including nurses, midwives, paramedics, cleaners, porters, and other allied health professionals under the Agenda for Change pay system are demanding a pay rise. They have rejected the Conservative government's bogus claim that they have recently had a "significant pay rise."

Hundreds of health workers demonstrated in London last week and dozens of protests are scheduled in cities across the country this Saturday, organised by Facebook groups. These actions coincide with the growing working class opposition internationally to the criminal policies of the governments during the coronavirus pandemic. In the UK, the murderous "herd immunity" policy continues to serve the demands of the financial oligarchy for a reopening of the economy, even as coronavirus spreads through communities and workplaces. According to official figures, more than 46,000 people have already perished, including more than 540 health and social care workers. The UK is among the worst countries in the world in terms mortality and health care worker deaths.

Last month, the Boris Johnson government announced a miserly 2 to 3.1 percent pay increase for 900,000 "public sector workers." The Treasury stated, "Reflecting the vital contributions public sector workers make to our country, these pay rises cover the Armed Forces, teachers, police officers, the National Crime Agency, prison officers, doctors and dentists, the judiciary, senior civil servants, and senior military personnel."

This excludes more than a million health workers in the NHS. In May, Health Secretary Matt Hancock refused any pay award for health workers, claiming that they had already had a "significant" raise. He was referring to a meagre 6.5 percent increase over three

years from 2018, dwarfed by the 20 percent fall in the value of their wages over the last ten years.

This "significant pay rise" leaves the average nurse £6,000 worse-off a year, as the accumulated inflation over the last ten years stands at 31.33 percent. This was a result of year after year of pay caps and pay freezes imposed by Tory-led governments and implemented with the tacit support of the health sector trade unions.

Those unions, including the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Unite, and Unison, now trying to get a hold on workers' protests, played a key role in selling out the 2018 pay struggle. The rotten deal reached with the Tory government and sold to the members as "the best deal in 8 years" was expected to be a de-facto pay cut as the estimated combined Retail Price Index inflation hike for the period was 9.6 percent. Pay progression of workers was also tied to performance. Former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt welcomed the deal for imposing "profound changes in productivity."

Sickness absence enhancements for low paid workers were slashed and unsocial hours payments went down by several percentage points for workers on band 1-3 of the Agenda for Change pay system. Many workers received only a 1.5 percent pay rise until their incremental pay progression.

Many health workers are outraged by the government's decision to refuse them a pay rise, against the views of the population. A survey carried out among British adults by Unison found 69 percent in favour of a significant wage increase for health workers in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. A petition demanding a 10 percent pay increase has reached more than 116,500 of signatures. Another calling to scrap spiteful car parking charges for NHS workers has gathered more than 768,000 signatures.

Health workers went on to social media, scathingly

criticizing the government's hypocrisy in calling them "NHS heroes" at the peak of the pandemic and now ignoring their demand for a decent pay increase. Some called the government's stand a "kick in the teeth" and a "slap in the face." Many identified that the trade unions are hostile to their demands and on the other side of the barricade in this struggle.

Lynn Grounds wrote in the *Nursing Notes* Facebook group, "No pay rise is presumably in preparation for more privatisation... selling it off with low salary bill will be attractive to the Conservative Government."

Charlotte McLaughlin commented on the same platform, "Indefinite strike until decent pay discussions are finalised and I don't think the RCN should be involved they sold out the last time and are not equipped with delivering their members requests."

Commenting on the rotten 2018 pay deal, Nettie Holding said, "I did not vote for this and neither did a lot of nurses. It doesn't matter what we vote for it happens anyway because nurses are abused by government all the time and shafted by the unions."

A health care assistant told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It is a lie that we had a significant pay rise. As an HCA, on the top of my pay band I received a small pay rise over the last three years as a part of the pay deal. But that cannot recompense the lost value of my wages over the last 10 years under austerity measures. Unions told us that it was a great deal. I knew it was far from the truth. Many of my colleagues realised that it was a total fraud when they received their first pay packet in July 2018 after the deal."

Even after eight months of the pandemic, NHS workers are still working without adequate protection from the coronavirus. None of the murderous Public Health England (PHE) guidelines which led to hundreds of avoidable deaths of health and social care workers have been changed. Surveys carried out among nurses and doctors highlighted that significant numbers of workers still do not have proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to shield themselves.

There are more than 40,000 nursing vacancies in England and many nurses are thinking of leaving the profession because of low pay and unsafe working conditions. A recent survey of 42,000 members by the RCN found the percentage thinking of leaving the profession has increased to 36 percent, or more than a third, from 27 percent at the end of last year.

Of those nurses who are thinking of leaving, 61 percent cited pay as a primary factor, with others citing the way nursing staff have been treated during the COVID-19 pandemic (44 percent), low staffing levels (43 percent), and lack of management support (42 percent).

The legacy of underfunding, privatization, and attacks on pay, terms, and conditions in the NHS left by both Labour and the Tories could not be clearer. The trade unions have been revealed as tried and tested instruments of the ruling class and its governments. They are not only responsible for the erosion of the social position of the workers but are complicit in implementing unsafe guidelines which have led to hundreds of deaths from COVID-19 across the sector.

NHS workers must act and organise independently of the trade unions and establish rank-and-file committees to unite with all other workers, to fight for better pay, terms, and conditions, and to safeguard health and safety at work. These committees must take up a socialist political struggle to secure the resources needed for a fully functioning health care system, by seizing control of the wealth and resources of the financial oligarchy, banks, big corporations, and big pharmaceutical companies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact