

UK: Poole Hospital and Royal Bournemouth Hospital staff respond to frontline nurse's exposure of dangerous working conditions

Ben Trent and Rory Woods
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Workers in the Poole Hospital Trust and Royal Bournemouth Hospital responded warmly to a recent exposure by a frontline nurse of conditions in the Poole Trust. The nurse's letter was published on the WSWs on December 11.

National Health Service (NHS) workers in Poole and Bournemouth, on England's south coast circulated the article across WhatsApp groups and other instant messaging services. They are concerned especially because the merger between the Trusts, which is part of an overhaul of health services in Dorset, will see a reduction of 120 beds.

Posted on the NHS FightBack Facebook group page, the letter was read by hundreds of people and widely shared. It was also shared to various NHS based campaign groups across Facebook.

The problems raised in the letter affect thousands of health and social care workers across the UK. More than 600 health and social care workers have lost their lives during the pandemic, many due to not having adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and perilous working conditions.

This was the result of Public Health England (PHE) and Conservative government policy. In March, while the first wave was on a steep incline, PHE downgraded coronavirus from a High Consequence Infectious Disease (HCID) in a conscious effort to stop the issuance of FFP3 grade masks and gowns to those who had to look after Covid-19 patients.

On the NHS FightBack page, Stephen Bates wrote, "My perception is that front line NHS/carer staff have been effectively blackmailed in to working without adequate PPE & many with nominal training in ICU care. This view has been supported by many reports from such workers. My question is simple, why has the HSE [Health

and Safety Executive] not acted to protect these brave people? They are not in the armed forces & we are not, contrary to political rhetoric, at war so why haven't they stopped this? In ANY other situation they would have acted swiftly. Is it a case of another guardian of the law abdication their duty in the face of political bullies?"

Maria Fitzpatrick wrote, "All areas were unsafe at some point in last 8 months, we have all been compromised."

Mary Bloggs commented, "We need a general strike until the government by Etonian con men collapses."

On the NHS Workers Say NO! to Public Sector pay inequality Facebook group page, the nurse's letter reached almost 20,000 of its 80,000 members and generated over 50 comments. Healthcare workers wrote of their agreement with the article.

Siobhan, from Dorset, said, "This is so sad for people working so hard and who are exhausted by the demands of the job to have inadequate resources to perform to the best of their abilities."

Lucy stated, "This happens all the time at Gloucester Royal hospital".

In her letter the Poole nurse stated, "I am not sure what the unions are doing. We are in a very dangerous situation. As members we expect them to do something about this. We should not have to tell them."

Health staff expressed agreement with this sentiment, with some going further in denouncing the unions. One reader commented that the "unions are useless".

Several people within the hierarchy of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) were openly hostile to the Poole letter. They pleaded that health workers not to lose faith in the trade unions, which they portrayed as fighting organisations that defend their members.

Mel Kerr, the North Lincolnshire Branch Chair of East Midlands Royal College of Nursing, wrote, "I know what,

as a rep for a union, they are doing. My question is, as a member, what are you doing? Are you active, do you attend your branch meetings, do you attend protests or demonstrations, do you vote in your board and council members, do you contact local and regional press to shout about staffing and fair pay, and parking fines, and anything else that troubles your mind?"

According to Kerr, RCN has failed to ensure the safety of its members because the membership as a whole is apathetic!

Becky Emmins, RCN Eastern member of the RCN Students Committee, responded to a comment by a retired nurse who was highlighting her frustration at the inaction of the healthcare unions by declaring:

"Insead [sic] of people blindly just paying into a union and expecting them to have all the work done for them, actually getting involved in campaigns would be awesome. For example, this group contains 84k members, I doubt any union has seen 84k members get involved in a campaign. If they did, imagine the things that could happen."

Despite the claims of Kerr and Emmins, the health unions have a long record of selling out strikes and protests, isolating workers, minimising the impact of industrial action and ensuring a defeat.

In 2011, 2.5 million workers across the public sector took up the call for a national Day of Action against pension cuts. Less than a month later, the unions betrayed this movement and organised separate deals with barely any changes to the original proposals.

In 2014, various unions recorded large majorities in ballots for strikes across numerous sectors. The 26,000 strong Royal College of Midwives (RCM) balloted its members for the first time in the union's history and found 82 percent in favour of strike action. The RCM then cancelled planned coordinated action for October 14 and sanctioned only fragmented strikes (in some cases "action short of a strike") across the week around that day. Despite the unions' efforts, 80,000 workers took to the streets of London on October 14.

In 2017, over a quarter of a million people protested the privatisation of the NHS—one of the largest rallies in defence of the NHS in history. The most cynical remarks came from Jeremy Corbyn's Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, who declared, "We owe a debt of honour to the junior doctors who took action last year. They were fighting to save the NHS... If industrial action takes place over pay, whether it's in Parliament or on the picket line, Jeremy [Corbyn] and I will be with you. And if we have

to take to the streets we will."

The results of Corbyn and McDonnell being "with you" were disastrous for the junior doctors. Their national strike was isolated by the health unions and sold out by the British Medical Association (BMA), with Corbynites playing a prominent role. Corbyn endorsed the sellout deal the BMA reached with the government through the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

In 2018, the RCN and 12 other health unions agreed with the government a pay deal which was in fact a pay cut. The major health unions hailed this as the "greatest pay deal in eight years".

A rebellion among the RCN membership saw its leadership ousted in a vote of no confidence. Out of the 12 who stepped down, 10 stood for re-election a month later, with six regaining positions.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the unions have deepened their treachery. In April, a nurse at Bournemouth hospital wrote a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* highlighting inadequate supplies of PPE. In response the union sided with management and offer statements to the Bournemouth Echo, claiming that the hospital had sufficient levels of PPE.

To fight the onslaught of the ruling elite, the working class needs fighting organisations. This is why the Socialist Equality Party established the NHS FightBack campaign, which calls for the creation of rank-and-file safety committees of healthcare workers to advance an independent political struggle against the ruling class and its political defenders in the fight for socialism and a workers' government.

The WSWS urges all National Health Service workers to contact us with their experiences. Health workers should join the NHS FightBack group and assist in building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact