

Working class must fight in defence of health workers!

UK National Health Service workers offered insulting 1 percent pay rise

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The Conservative government is offering a 1 percent rise in pay to over 1 million National Health Service (NHS) health workers, an effective cut. The government's announcement has evoked widespread outrage.

The Tories put forward the offer in its submission to the National Health Service Pay Review Body (NHSPRB). It is a de facto pay cut. NHSPRB pay recommendations for NHS staff in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be announced in May.

Health workers have seen a 20 percent pay cut over the last 10 years when accumulated inflation, measured by the retail price index, is factored in. Most experienced front-line nurses are £6,144 per year worse off. Many health workers are forced into doing extra shifts with the bank (staff resource pool) and agencies, using credit cards and even food banks to survive. If the government's pay proposal is realised a senior nurse and a junior doctor with years of experience will receive an extra £3.50 and £4 per week respectively.

Health workers have suffered on the front line as the pandemic has raged for more than a year, leading to the loss of more than 650 of their lives. They now face a new upsurge in cases due to the reopening the economy and all schools.

They used social media to denounce the pay proposal as a “kick in the teeth”, a “sick joke” and a “total disgrace.”

Last week, the Tories unveiled a class war budget handing billions in tax breaks to big business. This must be paid for by escalating attacks on workers' pay, and conditions.

Heath Secretary Matt Hancock told a Downing Street press conference Friday, “We have proposed what we

think is affordable to make sure that in the NHS people do get a pay rise.” Compare this with the fact that the government handed its special advisers almost £10 million in pay awards last year. The pay of Dominic Cummings, one of the main advocates of herd immunity, was upped before his eventual resignation by 40 percent, to over £140,000 a year. MPs were awarded a £3,000 rise on their £90,000 plus expenses salary last year, which was only delayed because of how politically explosive it was.

The Tory's proposal was met with headlines claiming that the health unions were on the warpath. Most cited the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) announcing a £35 million strike fund. The union represents 450,000 nurses, midwives and nursing students.

Neither the RCN nor any of the other health union, including UNISON with more than half a million health worker members, intends to organise any industrial action.

On Friday, the RNC provided an online members update. Chair of the RCN Council Dave Dawes declared the £35 million “industrial action fund” to be “the largest strike fund the UK has ever seen.”

But he then made clear that the union intends to do nothing except plead with the government to reconsider its pay offer, stating, “Over the next few months we will be announcing a series of steps to ensure that if we have to ballot for industrial action in the summer that we will win.”

According to the *Times*, the British Medical Association (BMA) that represents 159,000 junior doctors and which sold out a 2016 national strike by its members, “is unlikely to threaten a strike.” It is only “considering instructing members to refuse extra shifts

and to carry out the minimum work that is contractually obliged.”

Within hours, all four of the main health unions had dropped any talks of strikes, with the RCN, BMA, the Royal College of Midwives, and Unison publishing an open letter to Chancellor Rishi Sunak asking him to reconsider.

The opposition of the trade union bureaucracy to calling industrial action is epitomised by the stunt proposed by UNISON for the “public to stand on their doorsteps and balconies to protest next Thursday (11 March) at 8pm” with a “slow handclap”. It called for the stunt to “be repeated three weeks later on April 1, the day staff were due to have their next wage increase.”

Unison has called for NHS staff to receive “a pay rise of at least £2,000.” The RCN is calling for pay to be increased by 12.5 percent for “all nursing staff.” However, these same organisations, along with 11 other health unions, accepted a below inflation pay rise of 6.5 percent over three years from 2018 under the government’s Agenda for Change.

The campaign by the union bureaucracy will be aimed at organising public displays of solidarity with NHS staff which, in and of themselves, will not change the situation. Their aim is to direct the anger of health workers and the tens of millions of workers supporting them to make Johnson think again. This will involve the inevitable focus on a few Tory MPs who oppose the wage cap. The other main part of their campaign is the RCN’s newly launched petition to “Tell the UK Government you demand Fair Pay For Nursing.” Were any partial retreat to come from Downing Street, the most minimal rise, the unions would claim this a victory.

For all their rhetoric, the unions are ready to settle for a deal as low as 2.1 percent, the figure put forward openly by the Labour Party which is working as part of a de facto national coalition with the government during the pandemic. Speaking on the Sunday’s *Andrew Marr Show*, Shadow Health Secretary Jonathan Ashworth said that the government should pay the 2.1 percent deal previously agreed and “That should be the basis on which negotiations are now entered into with the trade unions.”

Ashworth declared repeatedly that the last thing that he wanted to see was NHS workers striking. “They

don’t want to go on strike. And I’ll always champion nurses and I’ll always stand by nurses, but they don’t want to go on strike.” Asked if he would back a strike if it broke out, he replied, “I will always stand by nurses and I will always support the rights of staff to take industrial action... but we don’t want to get to that place.... The government have to drop this 1% pay rise which is a pay cut because nurses... don’t want to go on strike...”

Many recognise the rotten role of the unions. Commenting on the Nursing Notes Facebook page on the RCN’s strike fund announcement, one worker said, “RCN Has NO teeth. All bark and no bite. Same old tripe.” Another reminded everyone, “As members we were sold down the river with the last so called ‘pay deal’... I worry it will happen again, the RCN has no back bone!”

NHS workers must organise industrial action independently of the unions and as they see fit, depending on the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. But theirs is a struggle for the entire working class. Workers in every sector, including educators being forced back into classrooms, and millions working in factories, retail and commercial outlets, and other businesses facing a risk to life, wage cuts, speed ups and job losses must take solidarity action.

The Socialist Equality Party and NHS FightBack calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every hospital, as part of a network of action and safety committees in every workplace. These committees must take the lead in demanding and organising a political general strike against the Johnson government. Those workers who support this call should contact the SEP today.

For further information visit NHS FightBack.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact