

Petition for 15 percent NHS pay rise gains more than 638,000 signatures

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A petition demanding a 15 percent restorative pay increase for National Health Service (NHS) workers has received over 638,000 signatures.

The petition was launched last summer by Matthew Tovey, a staff nurse in South Wales, in response to the pay crisis confronting health workers who were dealing with the full brunt of the coronavirus pandemic but were excluded from a still miniscule public sector pay rise.

Tovey updates the petition regularly with breaking news articles as a way of keeping supporters informed. It currently features a statement from the NHS Workers Say NO Facebook group. The petition's underlying message has remained "claps do not pay the bills," in reference to the "Clap for Our Carers" events hijacked by the Tory government last March, and this is the basis of its appeal.

Following the government's announcement that it would offer only a 1 percent pay rise—an effective cut—to more than 1 million NHS workers, Tovey updated the petition with an article from the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Working class must fight in defence of health workers!: UK National Health Service workers offered insulting 1 percent pay rise".

He quoted a section of the article which explained: "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."

The information in the article on the scale of the cuts suffered by NHS workers had a clear impact on those signing the petition after it was updated. Miriam Adebibe was not alone in writing, "Pay rise should be HIGHER than 20% to adjust for the pay cuts of accumulated inflation over the past 10 years!"

Tovey added his own comment: "Unions have announced preparations for strike action if needed (this being the last resort) But for any strike action to be agreed, it legally requires 50% of the membership to vote in the ballot.

"This Government and our unions need to know that we are serious in standing behind 15%, and possible strike action isn't an empty threat."

He concluded, "So add your name to this statement to say loud and clear: I am ready to take industrial action for 15%, to defend the safety of my patients and the survival of the NHS."

Speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Tovey said: "There is real anger on the ground not just in my area but across the UK... This anger has continued to build as our situations got worse and many of us losing friends along the way due to the government's mishandling of the pandemic."

He explained that strike action "is always a last resort, especially for NHS workers, but what else is there to demonstrate to this government that their neglect of essential workers has to stop?

"Human beings can only give so much, and whilst we continue to give it seems this government will take. The NHS has been underfunded and stretched for many years, it needs to stop, and here is unfortunately where it should stop. A strike is needed, the government has failed us at every opportunity, we need to be heard and we need to be seen."

The petition has tapped into a huge reserve of anger

and determination that exists among NHS and broader layers of workers, and which will come into sharp conflict with the trade unions and the Labour Party. Tovey's reference to the need to prove that "strike action isn't an empty threat" is doubtless informed by the trade unions' repeated demobilisation of health care workers struggles in recent years. The same is threatened today.

UNISON, which represents half a million health workers, responded to the pay announcement with a stunt, suggesting the public stand on their doorsteps and balconies and give a "slow handclap".

The British Medical Association (BMA) was reported by the *Times* as being "unlikely to threaten a strike." The union, which represents 159,000 junior doctors, sold out a national strike by its members in 2016. It is reportedly only "considering instructing members to refuse extra shifts and to carry out the minimum work that is contractually obliged."

Much was made of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) announcing a £35 million strike fund. The RCN represents 450,000 nurses, midwives and nursing students. However, the last thing the RCN would want to do is actually organise strike action. Even as he announced the fund, Chair of the RCN Council Dave Dawes made it clear that the union intended to do nothing except plead with the government to change its mind.

The RCN, BMA, UNISON, and the fourth main health union, the Royal College of Midwives, have quickly dropped talk of strikes and appealed to Chancellor Rishi Sunak to reconsider in an open letter. It should be remembered that these are the same unions that accepted the below-inflation rise of 6.5 percent over three years in 2018 under the government's Agenda for Change.

The Labour Party, working as part of a de facto national coalition during the pandemic, has called only for the 2.1 percent deal previously agreed, with implementation of this made the basis for future negotiations with the unions.

In its comment on the NHS pay offer, cited by Tovey, the WSWs concluded, "For all their rhetoric, the unions are ready to settle for a deal as low as 2.1 percent". The article called on NHS workers to "organise industrial action independently of the unions" in solidarity with other sections of workers.

"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."

This programme is gaining a wide audience, in the teeth of censorship organised by those close to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. An initial post of the WSWs article by the NHS FightBack Facebook page was blocked from being shared on many pro-NHS groups, whose administrators include forces high up in the trade unions and Labour Party apparatus and individuals within pseudo-left groups who support them. After the article was reposted and authorised in several groups, it quickly reached more than 24,500 people and was shared 358 times, receiving scores of supportive comments. Tovey updated his petition to feature the material from the WSWs a couple of days later.

This popular sentiment must be forged into conscious and organised opposition. The pandemic has restructured class relations, with trillions looted from society globally by the super-rich. The Johnson government, on behalf of the British ruling class, is preparing a massive assault on the social conditions of the working class, including by accelerating the break up and privatisation of the NHS.

Fighting back against these attacks requires a socialist political programme and leadership. We call on all workers in the NHS and other sectors who want to build that leadership to contact the Socialist Equality Party today.

For further information visit NHS FightBack



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact