

UK: Nurses at breaking point while unions work to smother fight-back

Julie Hyland**25 June 2021**

More than 220 nurses in the UK tried to commit suicide in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to an investigation by the Laura Hyde Foundation. The mental health charity, named after a 27-year-old nurse who took her own life in 2016, gathered the information from partner organisations that provide free mental health treatment for emergency service workers.

At least 226 nurses attempted to end their lives between April 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021, the foundation reported. During the same time frame, 79 paramedic and ambulance staff and 17 medical students also attempted suicide.

In a statement, Liam Barnes, Laura's cousin and founder of the charity, warned, "Make no mistake, we are now entering a new pandemic. A pandemic of mental health problems for frontline workers who stepped up at a time of national emergency. We have to help them."

The shocking figures highlight the extraordinary pressures placed on key workers by the homicidal indifference, ineptitude and corruption that has characterised every aspect of the Conservative government's response to the pandemic. This includes the awarding of public funds for essential health and safety measures to cronies who often failed to deliver.

The government's criminality is the outcome of its herd immunity policy, which saw Prime Minister Boris Johnson declare last October that he would rather "let the bodies pile high in their thousands" than countenance a third lockdown.

As a result, more than 150,000 people have died in the UK, including more than 1,000 health and social care workers. The appalling conditions to which frontline health care workers especially have been exposed were made clear in the resignation announcement of intensive care nurse Jenny McGee last month. McGee nursed Johnson when he was admitted to St Thomas' hospital in London last April, seriously ill with COVID. She denounced conditions at her hospital as "a cesspool of COVID" and "an absolute shitshow", and said she was quitting due to the government's "lack of respect" for National Health Service (NHS) and healthcare workers.

All the more insulting then is the response of a Department of Health spokesperson to the Laura Hyde Foundation report. The government "recognise the pressures that staff have faced during this time" and is "doing everything it can to support their wellbeing," they said.

This under conditions in which the government has insisted NHS staff in England should receive just a 1 percent pay rise—an effective pay cut—and even rejected a paltry one-off "COVID bonus" of £500 for healthcare workers.

The UK is now entering a new deadly stage of the pandemic due to the spread of the Delta variant. With hospitals and emergency services vastly under-resourced, and staff overworked and at breaking point, the government intends to lift the final, minimal social distancing measures next month.

This accounts for the furious response from health staff in response to Health Secretary Matt Hancock's lying claim before parliament's Health and Science committee that there had never been a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for NHS staff and that the discharge of COVID-positive patients into care homes played only a small part in spreading the virus in elderly facilities.

Health staff reported having to resort to wearing bin bags and purchasing face masks themselves. The extent of the government's failure to provide protection, and the lengths it went to cover it up, were the subject of a BBC *Panorama* investigation. Figures show that more than 50,000 residents in care homes died from COVID-19.

In February, a court found that Hancock acted unlawfully when his department failed to disclose details of PPE contracts it had signed early in the pandemic. In a departure from standard procurement practice, a "high-priority lane" was established for companies given leads "from government officials, ministers' offices, MPs and members of the House of Lords, senior NHS staff and other health professionals".

Among those winning lucrative contracts is a firm part-owned by Hancock's sister—Topwood Ltd—in which he has a 20 percent share. The parliamentary watchdog found in May

that this was only a “minor breach of the ministerial code” and exonerated the health secretary.

Nursing staff fury also extends to the Labour Party and the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer pointedly refused to demand Hancock’s resignation, saying only that he should “apologise”, while remaining in post. Labour is allied with the Tories in protecting the interests of the corporations and the super-rich, who are demanding an end to all social distancing measures, including supporting keeping schools fully open, to force workers back into unsafe workplaces. As for the RCN, it does not even mention the Laura Hyde report on its website.

The RCN claims to be fighting for a 12.5 percent pay rise for its members. In reality it is working to smother and divert their anger into futile appeals to the government to see “reason”.

This is made clear in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party government has announced it will implement a single-year NHS pay award of just 4 percent. Five of the seven health unions involved have accepted the deal, with GMB and RCN voting to reject—the latter’s members by almost 70 percent. On June 23, the RCN issued notice of a trade dispute with the Scottish government but reassured Edinburgh that this “does not commit the RCN to any future action...”

To cover for its inaction, the RCN has launched a UK-wide initiative to train up to 25,000 nurses as “activists” to help it “convince the government to improve its pay offer.”

It has enlisted the aid of Jane McAlevey, a writer for the *Nation* magazine, former staffer and executive board member of America’s Service Employees International Union and current Senior Policy Fellow at the UC Berkeley Labor Center. She is leading a six-week course covering topics such as “leader identification”, “semantics” and “organising conversations” to teach “activists” how they can become “more effective advocates” and help nurses channel their “anger and frustration.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, McAlevey is part of efforts by the pseudo-left—especially the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned *Jacobin* magazine—to bolster the tattered credibility of the unions by promoting “democratic unionism”.

The fraud of this campaign is shown by that fact that one of the model unions they advance, the Massachusetts Nurse Association (MNA), is currently working to isolate the strike by 700 nurses at Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The nurses walked out in March to demand an improved nurse-to-patient ratio. Those who, just as in the UK, were celebrated as “angels” and “heroes” a few months ago now face mass sackings. Management has been emboldened by

the MNA and AFL-CIO’s isolation of the strike. The MNA has made no call for its 23,000 members to join the picket lines and is withholding strike pay as part of a deliberate strategy to drive the nurses into submission.

McAlevey has been peddling the rotten wares of “democratic unionism” for the RCN for several years since she was a key speaker at its conference in 2016. That this has nothing to do with genuine workers democracy is underscored by events in 2018.

That year saw a massive rebellion by the RCN rank-and-file against the leadership, which had endorsed an effective pay cut for its 435,000 members based on a tissue of misleading and false information. When the truth of this sellout emerged, 78 percent of RCN members passed a motion of “no confidence”, forcing the leadership in its entirety to stand down. Within four days, new elections were rigged which saw half of the union functionaries reinstated, as disgust among the membership saw turnout collapse to as low as 4.8 percent in some areas.

The gulf between the union tops and the rank-and-file is far wider now. The recent election for RCN President recorded a turnout of just 31,188 members out of 475,549 eligible. Denise Chaffer, a director at NHS Resolution—an “arms-length” body of the Department of Health and Social Care—secured the post with a mere 14,050 votes.

The pre-condition for genuine workers’ democracy is the independence of workers from and against the union bureaucracy. Against the nationalist and pro-capitalist policy of the unions, it is necessary for health staff in the UK to join with their brothers and sisters internationally through the building of rank-and-file safety and workplace committees.



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