

“It is shameful that the unions are not standing up to the government over the NHS. I don’t think Starmer is fit for opposition. The NHS is on its knees and people are dying”

Workers speak out at NHS protests

Our reporters

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NHS FightBack members spoke to some of those attending last Saturday’s protests to defend the National Health Service on its 73rd anniversary.

Leeds

Alan is a nurse at Leeds General Infirmary and his partner, **Patricia**, is a playworker at the same hospital. Lee said, “When the pandemic hit we weren’t given a choice if we wanted to go to ICU [intensive care unit] or not, it was ‘you guys are going and you’ve just got to cope and grin and bear it.’”

Alan described how NHS workers had to cope without any planning in the first stage of the pandemic. “You are looking after a couple of patients and you don’t know how to treat them or what to do. I was moved into a ‘hot’ ward and at first, we just put people into a room and we went in ‘full gown’ and treated what we could. But then people with Alzheimers, dementia and things like that didn’t know what was happening so they were told to keep in a room with no interventions, no kind of communication and no understanding, it was just a horrible situation to be put in, so during that time we saw people die without loved ones.

“The mental effect it had on a lot of people and staff was unbelievable at the time, it was really, really hard going. I moved then to a ‘cold’ ward and then it was the constant battle of you’ve got to move people around and accommodate for ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ and the changes in PPE [personal protective equipment] that were happening on a weekly basis, it was just getting ridiculous.

“It was just unbelievable what we had to be put through and then it just kept going like that and the

burnout was just getting serious. People were off either because they were isolating or they were off because they were long-term sick...

“There was no support, there were no guidelines...Guidance changed on a weekly basis, it was all top end stuff, it was nothing integral to actually helping people. The news always said that it was the elderly that were more vulnerable but we were getting people in ICU who were in their 30s or 40s and that was heavily disregarded by the news as if it affected only the vulnerable (because of age) but we saw them younger and younger.”

Patricia spoke about her fears for when the government ends all Covid restrictions on July 19. “Even if we stop wearing masks and it’s ‘Freedom Day’, it’s not over and it’s not ever going to be over. What about support for the people who’ve been through it and their mental health?”

Manchester

Annette is a nurse who has worked for nine years at a Manchester hospital. She said she was appalled “watching Wimbledon [tennis tournament in London], and I could see everyone in the audience—no masks—and at the football [European Football Championship].

“I came to demonstrate because of staffing levels. We’re not retaining staff. It isn’t safe, we need more people on the ground, good nurses, they don’t all want to progress, paid for their skills.”

The government is only offering nurses a 1 percent pay increase, in reality a pay cut after inflation. Annette commented, “How are we attracting young boys and girls when we can’t give families [the pay] they need. If you want more nurses, you have to acknowledge that.

My colleagues are fed up, burnt out. We want to do a good job, but if we make a mistake, we'll hurt someone.'

Asked what her experience was with her trade union in relation to the issues she raised, Annette replied, "My experience with the union is not positive."

Sheffield

Amy and her friend **Sarah** attended the event in Sheffield. Amy works as a nurse in a hospital over 100 miles away on the east coast. She had come to Sheffield to protest as "There was nothing organised at all where we were on the east coast. And we felt strongly enough to come over here."

Reflecting on her 30 years of nursing, she said: "Things have changed. Absolutely changed. It's not the way it should be. Nurses are not being treated properly. They're downtrodden, they're underpaid, overworked, and undervalued. We just want it to be equal. No one's asking for massive bonuses or things like that. We just want to be treated fairly."

Asked her opinion of the health care trade unions, Amy said: "They've not been helpful at all. I'm in the Royal College of Nursing. So, they sent out banners and badges but there's no one here today. I mean, where are they? They should be here."

Asked what she thought of the call for the building of rank-and-file committees of health workers independent of the unions—made in the NHS FightBack statement, "Defend lives and protect the National Health Service: Build rank-and-file committees of health workers!"—Amy replied: "Yes, I think it's a good idea. I think we need to do something. We can't stay as we are. Something's got to be done."

Peter is a medical student at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which employs around 16,000 staff.

He said, "[Former Health Secretary Matt] Hancock was pushed to resign over an extra marital affair, not the 150,000 dead he is responsible for as Health Minister. It is absolutely incredible that someone so high up in government can tell such lies as claiming that no NHS workers died because of the lack of personal protective equipment.'

Peter denounced the unions and Labour Party, who the government have relied on to enforce their attacks on the NHS over the last 11 years. He said, "It is shameful that the unions are not standing up to the

government over the NHS. I don't think [Labour Party leader, Sir Keir] Starmer is fit for opposition. The NHS is on its knees and people are dying."

Peter said that the article published by the BMJ (*British Medical Journal*) which described the response of the Johnson government as social murder was correct and it had been read widely among his colleagues.

In response to the government's claim that there is no money to fund the necessary medical response to the pandemic, Peter replied, "That is b*****ks. Billions have been forked out to the private companies. And how much has been spent for a tracing system which does not work? There is no 'we are all in this together.' There are those at the top who are making a lot of money out of other people's misery and those at the bottom who are trying to help each other."



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