

UK midwives hold vigils protesting acute staff shortages

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Midwives along with students of midwifery and support staff up and down the country held protest vigils on November 21, drawing attention to the dire conditions and staff shortages affecting maternity services across the UK.

Protests were held in 50 different towns and cities, with maternity workers marching through Sheffield, Bristol, Manchester, Peterborough and elsewhere. They chanted “More midwives now”, holding placards proclaiming, “Save the midwife”, “Midwives are an endangered species!” and “Safe staffing saves lives”.

In Manchester, some 600 midwives, student midwives and other maternity workers and supporters marched in St Peters Square, near the Town Hall. Some of the mainly handwritten banners read, “Pushed to the limit”, “We need a break. Literally,” and “Stop calling us ‘heroes’ Start treating us like humans.”

Marchers chanted, “What do we want? Happy women,” and “More midwives”.

Student midwives speaking to WSWS reporters in Manchester told of the “difficult and dangerous conditions” under which they are working and training. Tragic incidents included students needing to look after dead babies, “This is traumatic, but you do not have any time to deal with how you feel.”

In Sheffield, a midwife told *The Star* that after working for ten years, the pressure was greater than she had ever experienced.

“We are seeing droves of midwives leaving the profession because of the strain. They were already under strain pre-Covid, but since Covid it has become completely unsustainable. For every 30 midwives that go into the service, 29 leave.”

In Nottingham, a community midwife of 25 years told the BBC, this was the “first time I have felt I need to act.” They were “expected to look after three to four

labouring women at one time. How can you give them your undivided attention?”

In Leeds, an ante-natal educator said midwives were “burnt out, they're ready to leave and It's about the safety of the birthing women, the parents and the midwives as well.”

A petition on change.org demanding more government funding for maternity services “to solve the staffing crisis” has received almost 115,000 signatures.

Many of the signatories left messages of support, including mothers who expressed their gratitude for the help they had received during and after childbirth. Lynn wrote, “I was lucky to have the help of several wonderful midwives when my boys were born. They were not rushed off their feet, it gave them time to relate to me and my family. It meant a lot.”

Paula wrote, “I'm signing this petition as a mother. The service Midwife's provide is a vital one. Remember Children are the future!”

Another signatory explained, “I'm signing this petition as a midwife who has had enough. Burnout comes as part of the job description, anti-anxiety meds are prescribed as soon as you have your degree in your hand and some form of alcohol is the normal end of work routine. This is not okay.”

Research conducted by Oxford Academic into occupational medicine and substance abuse among maternity staff found that substance abuse by midwives regularly goes under reported as the consequences are sackings rather than support. Their report found that 37 percent of respondents had indicated concerns about a colleague's substance use, noting that “stigmatizing attitudes and punitive actions can dissuade help-seeking.”

Staffing numbers in maternity units have been in

decline for years. In 2010, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron promised to boost numbers by 3,000. More than a decade on, this figure is still not within the reach of Boris Johnson's Tory government.

Skeleton staffing levels have already had serious consequences for pregnant and labouring women. To cite one example, a woman was forced to give birth at home assisted only by her husband as there was a shortage of midwives, and their local maternity delivery suite in Peterborough had to be closed.

The harsh reality facing midwives is a familiar one to anyone working within the National Health Service. Years of austerity and budget cuts have pushed staffing to critical levels. During the pandemic, maternity staff have been one of many departments redeployed to help with the surge of patients needing care in hospitals. This has led to crippling staff burnout and many reluctantly walking off the job in order to save their sanity.

The government has declared they are looking to recruit a further 1,200 midwives. New data released from the Nursing and Midwifery Council shows where these numbers are coming from. Rather than improving pay and conditions in the UK, thereby retaining those who study midwifery, recruits are being sought from poorer countries to the detriment of maternity services for their own populations.

The latest figures for March-September 2021 show 1,334 nurses joined the UK nursing and midwifery register from Nigeria--a country on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Red recruitment list. This means that active recruitment should not be taking place in these countries as they are required domestically once trained.

Contrary to the claims of Health Secretary Sajid Javid, NHS workers are confronted with unsustainable conditions and poor pay. Moreover, the service is being subject to "stealth" privatisation, being sold off piece meal, in order to enrich the profit-hungry private health care companies.

Significantly, the March with Midwives protests and petition were organised by rank-and-file health workers. The Royal College of Midwives, which is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, played no part in organising or promoting the protests. Union banners were noticeably absent on most of the protest vigils.

This speaks to the role of the trade unions as the

junior partners of the employers. In the NHS, despite massive votes against the government's paltry three percent pay increase—a real terms cut given inflation is already above four percent—all the trade unions are delaying calling any form of strike action until 2022.

NHS FightBack encourages midwives to join with other NHS workers in a united struggle against the privatisation of the NHS, for better staffing, pay and conditions through establishing independent rank-and-file committees to organise and lead the fight.

Link up with NHS FightBack through our Facebook page.



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