

Serco ancillary staff at St Barts NHS Trust begin two-week pay strike

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Six hundred facilities workers at Barts Health NHS Trust in London began a two-week strike on Monday against exploitation and low pay.

The members of the union Unite are employed by services provider Serco and work as cleaners, porters, security guards, catering and reception staff across St Bartholomew's Hospital, Royal London Hospital and Whipps Cross.

With 16,000 staff, Barts Health National Health Service Trust is the largest in England and serves a population of over 2.5 million people in the capital.

In a strike ballot held in November, the workers voted by 97 percent to reject the company's miserly 3 percent pay offer, a cut in real wages with inflation running at over 7 percent. Moreover, Serco employees at Barts Trust receive up to 15 percent less compared to NHS workers in similar roles.

Serco is a multi-billion company listed on the FTSE 250 stock index. It took over the £600 million contract to provide "soft" facilities management services to Barts in 2016. The contract was for an initial 7-year term, with the possibility of extending to 10 years. Prior to Serco, the services were delivered by several providers. Serco claimed that bringing all services under a single contract would "provide efficiency gains to the Trust which will help fund future patient care."

This is a policy of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The promised "efficiency gains" have been made through paying low wages, increasing workloads, and attacking work conditions. Serco workers report draconian use of the company's sickness and disciplinary policies and management bullying to meet impossible workloads.

However, even these levels of exploitation have failed to satisfy Serco's profit lust. The company has announced it will be pulling out of the Barts contract a year early, at the end of April 2023.

In November 2021, Serco raised its profit forecast for the year from £200 million to £225 million. It has profited handsomely from lucrative contracts to provide test-and-trace services, running a fifth of the country's COVID-19 testing sites. Last summer, it won a £322 million contract to keep COVID-19 test centres in England and Northern Ireland running for another 12 months.

Such has been Serco's pandemic profiteering that for the first time in 7 years, it paid out dividends totalling £17 million last year and provided its CEO with a remuneration package worth just under £5 million.

The company's largesse, however, does not extend to those it employs on or around the minimum wage. In a slap in the face, it has boasted of the £100 one-off "bonus" it is making to all frontline staff to "reflect their hard work during the pandemic".

The strike by Barts workers is part of a growing wave of pay struggles. Bus drivers, airport ground crew, lecturers, tube drivers, railway cleaners, warehouse workers and scaffolders are all currently in dispute. But Serco workers at Barts can place no confidence in Unite the union, whose General Secretary Sharon Graham claims to be "100 percent" behind them.

Unite has issued no pay demand of its own to Serco, merely calling on the company to "improve" its offer. Under Graham's leadership, Unite is deliberately channelling a huge groundswell of pent-up demands for action into isolated disputes based on below-inflation pay claims.

In 2017, Unite sabotaged 23 days of strike action by Serco workers at Barts, isolating the dispute to contractors, before ramming through a miserly 1 percent pay increase. The sellout was endorsed by Labour's then shadow chancellor and close Jeremy Corbyn ally John McDonnell who visited pickets

professing his solidarity.

Throughout the pandemic, health unions including the Royal College of Nursing, Unite and Unison have blocked a joint fight by healthcare workers for improved pay and working conditions. In 2021, the Royal College of Nursing and Unison held a series of non-binding consultative and indicative ballots aimed at wearing down opposition among NHS workers that erupted in 2020 with demands to end poverty pay. Workers voted by wide margins to reject the Johnson government's insulting 3 percent pay "rise" (a cut in real terms), but turnout was low as workers had no confidence, based on years of bitter experience, that the unions would fight.

To wage a successful struggle, it is necessary to take the initiative out of the hands of Unite and establish independent rank-and-file committees in the NHS.

Through rank-and-file strike committees, Barts Trust workers can appeal to their colleagues across the NHS and beyond, organising a combined fight to overturn decades of pay restraint and the gutting of the NHS. This means a direct political struggle against the Johnson government and its de facto coalition partners in the Labour Party, based on the fight for socialism. The profits of Serco and other financial parasites must be confiscated to fund decent pay and working conditions for all workers and emergency public health measures to end the pandemic.

The WSWs urges all NHS and social care workers to contact us with their experiences. For more information, visit [NHS FightBack](#) and share your experiences of the pandemic and conditions at work.



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