

UK High Court bans pickets at Great Ormond Street Hospital: A frontal assault on the right to strike

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Security guards striking at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) were forced to suspend picketing last week after a High Court injunction was served on their union. The United Voices of the World (UVW) and its members were threatened with imprisonment, fines and/or the seizure of their assets if they continued to peacefully picket outside the hospital.

The High Court served its injunction on February 10, effective immediately. The UVW was given just seven minutes' notice of the orders.

UVW co-founder Petros Elia explained, "GOSH security guard members of UVW and anyone supporting them have just been enjoined by the High Court from doing any of the following things within 200 metres of GOSH... 'waving banners', 'playing music', 'shouting', making 'rapid or dramatic movements', 'making loud noises', engaging in 'vigorous dancing' or 'photographing or videoing' anyone entering or leaving GOSH."

A "Penal Notice" issued by the High Court warned, "If you the defendants disobeyed this order you may be held to be in contempt of court and may be imprisoned, fined or have your assets seized and or you may be found to be guilty of a criminal offence for which you may be imprisoned or fined or both."

It continued, "Any other person who knows of this order and does anything which helps or permits the defendants to breach the terms of this order may also be held to be in contempt of court and may be imprisoned or fined or have their assets seized."

On Monday, the UVW issued a statement explaining, "This is an unprecedented legal ruling to silence workers and one of the biggest legal attacks against the human rights of the trade union movement in decades."

Elia warned the High Court's actions were "a sneak preview of what life will be like if the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill becomes law, allowing employers to severely restrict the ability of unions to hold picket lines, with the threat of fines or imprisonment."

The Johnson government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will effectively end the right to protest. It will allow the home secretary to create laws defining "serious disruption" to communities and organisations, with police empowered to impose draconian sanctions. Judges will be able to jail a person for up to 10 years for inflicting "serious annoyance" on a person without reasonable excuse. As the Socialist Equality Party has warned, the bill is part of a battery of police state measures being readied to deal with mass protests over social inequality, austerity and the drive to war.

The High Court's injunction against GOSH workers is a warning to the entire working class. It takes place amid a wave of strikes and pay disputes sparked by rising inflation and fuelled by the bitter experience of workers during the pandemic. GOSH made its application to the High Court on February 9, just days after Bank of England Governor Alan Bailey delivered a speech calling for "painful" wage restraint.

Security guards at GOSH had already held five days of strikes as part of a planned 44-day action demanding full sick pay, maternity pay, holiday pay and other benefits enjoyed by National Health Service (NHS) workers in-house. On February 9, hospital management warned they would apply for a court injunction against the UVW unless its members ceased all picketing at the children's hospital, limiting the number of protestors to six.

The UVW rejected GOSH's threats, describing them as "oppressive and a draconian and unjustified encroachment on our member's human rights to picket and protest."

Similar repressive anti-strike measures are being invoked against workers internationally, including last month's court injunction against 17,000 engineers and conductors at BNSF railroad in the United States, this week's strike ban defied by nurses in Australia and the deployment of tanks and riot police against striking metalworkers in Cadiz, Spain by the PSOE-Podemos government.

The High Court's injunction followed a physical attack on pickets days earlier, outside the offices of GOSH CEO Matthew Shaw. Erica Rasheed, one of the striking security guards, explained, "We were protesting and then from nowhere this guy came and started swearing at us and then he left. After a while, the other one just came up from nowhere and tried to take the megaphone from the lady, and then she fell. Then again, she stood up and he didn't give up, after a while he tried to take the megaphone and she fell again.

"We were surprised. Why are they doing this to us? We are peacefully doing what we want to do, what we can, fighting for our rights. It's wrong!"

Rasheed's colleague Abbey Lincoln added, "We were protesting peacefully doing what is legal for us to do by law. We don't know if it was organised or arranged but they're trying to intimidate us. But we cannot be intimidated. We are going to continue until they listen, until we win."

The UVW has filed a crime report with the Metropolitan Police, but the demand must be raised for full public disclosure of all details relating to this incident, including whether the assailants have any connections to the far-right.

GOSH security guards are determined to fight, but a sharp warning must be made about the UVW and its promotion of racial politics. The union was formed in 2014 by sections of the pseudo-left and works closely with the shrinking faction of Labour "lefts" and Stalinists grouped around Jeremy Corbyn and the *Morning Star*. It receives funding from the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, which is affiliated to the Left Party in Germany, a staunch pillar of the German state.

On the eve of their six-week strike at GOSH, the union organised a group legal claim for indirect racial

discrimination against the hospital, explaining, "The predominantly Black, brown and migrant security guards believe their status as outsourced workers, on worse terms and conditions than predominantly white, in-housed NHS workers, is an example of structural racism."

This politics is toxic. It serves to pit black and migrant workers against "predominantly white" in-house workers who are portrayed as beneficiaries of "white privilege". This reactionary nonsense serves to divide workers and isolate strikers from their class brother and sisters across the NHS. The source of the attacks on contract workers is not "structural racism" but capitalism.

The strike by security guards at GOSH follows similar action by the hospital's contract cleaners who demanded parity pay and conditions with NHS cleaners. The UVW negotiated a deal with GOSH to bring the cleaners in-house, but the hospital reneged on its promise to guarantee equal conditions.

Again, the UVW has directed the struggle of cleaners down the path of racial politics, with Petras claiming, "Most of these workers are Black, Brown, Asian and migrant and are deeply unhappy with a situation which sees them consciously paid less than their white in-house colleagues of a similar grade and denied NHS T&Cs [terms and conditions] such as full pay sick pay."

The UVW will be contesting the High Court's injunction against their strike at a hearing today in London. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers everywhere to come to the defence of the UVW and its members and to campaign in defence of the picketers against state repression.



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