

Unite agrees de facto pay cut to end Serco health workers strike at Barts NHS Trust

Tony Robson
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The Unite union last week ended the fight of around 600 Serco workers at Barts Health NHS Trust in London based on an agreement amounting to a de facto pay cut. The pay deal backed by Unite is for 3 percent and a £400 lump sum, less than half the 7.8 percent (RPI) rate of inflation.

To legitimise its sellout, Unite announced in a March 3 press release that the Trust had agreed to bring the outsourced ancillary staff back in house. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, “Unite has struck a landmark agreement with one of the UK’s largest NHS trusts to end the two-tier workforce... The workers are exposed to the same risks as NHS-employed staff, so it’s only right for them to be treated equally and brought back into NHS employment.”

In fact, as Unite itself notes, this will only take place once the present contract is allowed to run down with private company Serco at the end of April 2023.

The union’s press release hailing a “major victory” deliberately buries the toxic contents of the pay agreement, stating only that “Unite’s strike action also delivered a cash lump sum for workers, including agency staff, on top of the annual pay increase.”

Around 1,800 outsourced staff with Serco will be brought onto the standard Agenda for Change (AfC) terms and conditions of National Health Service staff when they are transferred over to the Trust, which employs 17,000 staff across its five hospital sites in central and east London.

Workers on the Serco contract are currently paid 15 percent less than those employed directly by the NHS, on wage levels close to the minimum wage. For now they have been saddled with a pitiful pay award outstripped by inflation and worth even less as National Insurance contributions increase next month by 1.25 percent amid soaring prices.

The 600 cleaners, porters, security guards, catering and reception staff based at St Bartholomew’s Hospital, Royal London Hospital and Whipps Cross staged two weeks of strike action from January 31 to February 13.

The large turnout on picket lines and protests reflected the determination to fight against unequal pay, terms and conditions. Other cited grievances included management bullying, the punitive use of the company’s sickness and disciplinary policies, and unbearable workloads.

This has all been swept under the carpet with Unite stating, “To address the issue of bullying, the Trust and Serco have agreed that Serco managers will undergo training.”

Serco workers had already rejected the 3 percent offer tabled by the company in taking the strike action. Unite cannot mention its previous statements complaining that “Serco’s offer does nothing to close the pay gap between outsourced workers and directly employed NHS workers.”

Unison, the largest union in the country and in the health service, had already accepted the 3 percent deal, plus an insulting £100 lump sum, for the same section of ancillary staff it represents at the Trust. The price set by Unite on its sellout of the pay fight was an additional £300.

After the first fortnight of industrial action, Unite moved to suspend the next two-weeks of strikes due to commence February 28. The union appealed to a Trust management board meeting on March 2 to bring Serco workers in house and transfer them onto the AfC terms and conditions from day one.

Unite has now agreed to end the dispute on a promissory note from the Trust that this will occur before a deadline set for next year. The Trust has stated,

“Detailed work will commence to bring all ‘soft facilities management’ services in-house from 1 May 2023.”

In the meantime, Serco can continue extracting profits under a contract it has held since 2017, but which it had already announced it was withdrawing from a year early in spring 2023.

The FTSE 100 listed company is one of many that has had a good pandemic. In 2021, it paid a dividend for the first time in seven years, totalling £17 million, and provided its CEO with a remuneration package worth just under £5 million. It is one of the 22 private operators awarded the lucrative government contract to run the highly inept Test and Trace system .

The sellout by Unite of the Serco workers fight at Barts is in the mould of similar “victories” Graham has claimed in 49 other pay disputes. As the WSWS stated in a previous article :

“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.”

A genuine victory of the Serco workers at Barts would have seen the pandemic profiteer stripped of the contract and ancillary workers brought immediately in house on full parity pay and terms and conditions. In presenting the Barts agreement as a victory, Unite will continue its policing of NHS workers’ opposition, along with the other health unions.

NHS FightBack stands for the establishment of rank-and-file committees to unify outsourced and NHS employed health workers in one struggle. Poverty pay, management bullying and unbearable workloads are the lot of the entire 1.4 million-strong NHS workforce.

The health unions have presided over what would have been thought impossible by facilitating the government’s imposition of a below-inflation 3 percent

pay award last year during a raging pandemic. They continue to demobilise a fight against the further privatisation and gutting of the NHS through the government’s Health and Care Bill.

Unite has appealed to Conservative MPs, all but three of whom voted for the Bill, to step back from these plans. The pro forma and cynical character of this exercise was underscored by Graham’s admission that the “campaign” was destined to fail.

On February 26, a day of action was organised by SOS NHS with the backing of the major unions Unite, Unison and the GMB. These unions, which collectively have an NHS membership of 600,000 workers, drew an attendance of a few thousand at the 70 events around the country, such is the lack of confidence they inspire and the contempt in which they are held by health workers. Those such as Jeremy Corbyn who came to pay lip service to the NHS were pallbearers at a funeral, not the standard bearers of a fight against the corporate and financial elite.

The Labour Party and trade unions stand fully behind the government’s Orwellian mantra of “living with COVID-19”, normalising yet more deaths and infections as all emergency measures are stripped back, allowing Omicron and new variants to pass through an unprotected population.

We urge health workers to participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Inquest is exposing the rampant criminality and profits before lives agenda of governments around the world. In opposition, what is required is a globally co-ordinated intervention of the international working class against the nation state framework and profit motive of capitalism, to champion science and mobilise the resources of society to end the pandemic.



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