

London's Great Ormond Street Hospital security guards strike continues, United Voices of the World union isolates fight

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Security guards at Great Ormond Street Hospital for children (GOSH) in London are continuing their strike and protests for parity of pay, terms and conditions with National Health Service (NHS) staff. The workers are demanding an end to their outsourcing and to be brought “in-house.”

The guards, members of the United Voices of the World (UVW) union, began their strike last year and will have clocked up 50 days of action by the end of April, making it the longest strike in the NHS. This speaks to the determination of the workers to win their fight, but the UVW has overseen the isolation of resistance and has scaled down the action.

Following three days of strikes last December the security guards took 44 days of action between February 2 to March 18 with one day stoppages resuming every Friday from April 1.

The security staff are employed by Carlisle Support Services, part of the £1.2 billion business empire of former Conservative Party deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft. While the company accounts report pre-tax profits of £1.3 million on revenues of £65 million in 2019, the guards are paid a pittance of just £11.05 an hour.

Ashcroft, who has donated millions to the Tory party, is notorious for having enjoyed “non-dom” status for 10 years, as he lives in Belize, meaning he paid no UK taxes. Carlisle Support Services has been able to cash in from the outsourcing of services such as cleaning, security, events and providing temporary retail staff. Most workers are employed at the minimum wage and with the most sub-standard conditions.

This is the case with the 36 GOSH security guards. If they are ill, they only receive statutory sick pay of £96.35, less than a quarter of their basic weekly wage. In contrast, directly employed NHS staff at the hospital can receive up to six months on full pay when ill.

Security guard Peter Akintoye, employed at the hospital since 2017, told the *Guardian* he had only had one sick

absence in four years. “I have to go to work when I’m ill. It’s not just me, it is almost all of us. We cannot afford to be sick. We still have to come to work.”

In February, the workers were forced to suspend picketing and protests after the UVW was served with a High Court injunction following legal proceedings launched by the hospital trust management and for which they reportedly paid £40,000 in legal fees. This threatened the union and its members with imprisonment, fines and/or the seizure of their assets if they continued to picket peacefully outside the hospital.

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.”

Following a hearing before the High Court in mid-February, the terms of the original injunction were modified but maintained restrictions on protests within 50 metres of the hospital.

Elia told the press, “We’re pleased we were able to claw back some of the rights which were taken and attempted to be taken from us, including the right to dance and protest in unlimited numbers outside GOSH, among others, but the restrictions in place are still unjustifiably oppressive.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, “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.”

From the start, the UVW has cast the dispute in racial terms. It depicts the strike as being against “racist outsourcing.” Before the start of the strike, it organised a group legal claim for indirect racial discrimination against

the hospital saying, “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.”

Such a perspective pits black and migrant workers against their class brothers and sisters of other ethnicities and nationalities employed directly by the NHS, who are presented as enjoying a privileged existence with no reference to the poverty pay, management bullying and unbearable workloads confronted by the 1.4 million strong workforce.

Those working for the NHS are part of a multi-ethnic and multi-national workforce. According to official statistics, the NHS workforce is 78 percent “white” and 22 percent “non-white”, compared to national figures of 87 and 13 percent. Among NHS workers can be found representatives of virtually every country on the globe. A House of Commons library paper from September 2021, records that although most NHS staff are “UK/British,” they work alongside tens of thousands from 212 other countries.

By making the issue confronting the GOSH security guards one of race discrimination, the UVW denies the essential class content of the struggle in which they are engaged. This is further demonstrated by the forces to which it is appealing for support.

The UVW claims to have 5,000 members and be a “grassroots trade union,” yet its campaign is oriented to the Labour Party and the main trade unions, the organisations responsible for decades of betrayals and sell-outs of workers’ struggles. At the rally launching the strike, the UVW gave over its platform to former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and Labour MP Richard Burgon, as well as leading members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union and University and College Union. Other union bureaucrats who have addressed UVW rallies outside GOSH include National Education Union General Secretary Kevin Courtney and Unison executive committee member Sandy Nichol.

Corbyn spent his time as Labour leader between 2015 and 2020 ditching everything he had promised when elected—to end Labour’s pro-business, pro-austerity, pro-war agenda. Despite widespread support, particularly from younger people, he refused to throw out the right-wing Blairites, and ensured control of the party passed back to this cabal, now headed by Sir Keir Starmer.

For proof of the role of the trade unions as a corporate police force, one need look no further than the main unions operating inside the NHS. After more than a decade of austerity and below inflation pay rises for NHS workers, the Johnson government was able to inflict another cut in real

wages last year, when it imposed a three percent wage increase with inflation already running at 5.1 percent. It could do so because the health unions suppressed mass opposition in the million-strong NHS workforce.

Despite large majority votes opposing the government pay offer, by tying up the pay dispute in a string of non-binding consultative and indicative ballots, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Unison, Unite and the rest were able to prevent action. In the end, the unions shelved any action after three quarters of the Unison and RCN membership abstained because they did not want to participate in the degrading pantomime of a struggle which would have been organised by the unions before forcing through a sell-out.

Security guards at GOSH should reject the divisive racial narrative of the UVW and its bankrupt appeals to the trade unions and Labour Party. Their true allies are the millions of fellow workers in the NHS, the public sector and beyond. Workers everywhere confront the same attacks on their pay packets as a result of the government letting inflation rip and loading the costs of the pandemic, and now the US-NATO war against Russia, onto their backs.

What is needed are new organs of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and which seek to unite all workers in a common fight guided by a socialist perspective, placing the needs of the many above the profits of the few.

This is the programme of NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party. Get in touch with NHS FightBack to share your experiences and link up with our Facebook page. Sign up for the WSWS Health Care Workers Newsletter here.



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