

Scottish health workers ballot on strike action as doctors call for 30 percent rise

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Health workers in Scotland represented by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) are being balloted on a 5 percent pay offer, with a recommendation to reject and support strike action. Results are expected in early August.

Last month the British Medical Association (BMA), which represents doctors and consultants, passed a motion at its annual conference calling for its members' pay to be restored to the real terms' level of 2008, which would mean a 30 percent increase.

The conference also passed a motion calling for industrial action in opposition to new contract conditions that would see GPs having to open their surgeries on Saturdays and offer evening and weekend appointments. The new working arrangements are seen as too inflexible and overly bureaucratic by many doctors, who argue they take away their ability to allocate resources to best serve their own communities.

While the motion calling for pay restoration was passed, there was considerable opposition from delegates who were critical of the 5-year time frame being proposed, according to the BMA's own report of the conference.

Aizemea Okojie, a Brighton-based gynaecologist, told the conference, "I'm moving against this motion not because of the content but because of the five-year timeframe. I would prefer it to be shorter. I get anxiety attacks looking at my bank balance every month."

Consultant Kevin O'Kane said the motion gave the message to government that they had "five years to sort out pay" and "that's not good enough".

"Our members deserve better, and they deserve it now. Don't waste our opportunity with a five-year flaccid fudge. We need action this side of the general election."

Speaking to the *Manchester Evening News*, Dr Faisal

Bhutta explained the pressures affecting GPs across the country. "Normally, we get a quieter period in June and July, but it's just been relentless". Outlining the reasons to strike, such as pay and the new contracts he said, "As GPs, our pay has been frozen for four to five years, limited to around one percent increase. But all the while, the workload is going up, we're asked to do more and more, including possibly starting seven-day working."

Falling living standards, rising costs, wage freezes and ever-growing workloads are a tinderbox for NHS staff across the UK. These issues have caused huge numbers of staff to leave their posts, which has fuelled a massive staff shortage across all parts of the health service.

The most recent data from NHS England shows a vacancy rate of 10 percent on March 31, 2022, within the Registered Nursing staff group (38,972 vacancies), up on the same period the previous year when the vacancy rate was 9.2 percent (34,678 vacancies).

A survey of more than 2,000 NHS staff in June found that more than half had considered leaving in the last 12 months, with one in five actively looking for other jobs or already in the process of leaving. Four out of five said poor pay was one of the main reasons they would quit the NHS. According to survey organiser @WithNHSStaff, "Stress due to pressure of work and the ongoing impact of the pandemic was a factor for 63 percent of staff. Understaffing, stress, and burnout, compounded by low wages, are leaving many feeling they would be better off working anywhere else."

The BMA conference took place in the aftermath of the three-day stoppage by rail workers belonging to the RMT union. London GP Dr Jacqueline Applebee, moving the resolution for strike action in opposition to the imposition of new contracts effectively imposing

seven-day working, told delegates to channel their “inner Mick Lynch”, referring to the RMT General Secretary.

“We should take our lead from the RMT, they have quite rightly said enough is enough. No more pay erosion, no more service cuts. The RMT’s issues very much chime with those we face in the NHS—solidarity to them.”

Doctors and other health workers should look critically at the role being played by Lynch, the RMT and wider trade union bureaucracy, including the health unions.

After three days of solid strike action by rank-and-file rail workers, it was back to business as usual for the RMT, sitting down with management to try and cobble together a deal while all cuts remain on the table: including mandatory 7-day working, new grading structures, salaries and roles, lower pay and longer hours contracts, and massive attacks on the railways pension scheme.

At the Durham Miners’ Gala last weekend, Lynch was fêted as a militant union leader who was standing up for the working class. But in his speech, he made clear that despite Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer having explicitly opposed the strike and banned his MPs from supporting RMT picket lines, he wanted a Starmer-led Labour government.

Lynch says this of a party which speaks as a defender of big business and the “national interest”, which opposes workers taking strike action to defend their pay and conditions. In a recent visit to Leeds General Infirmary, Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said NHS strikes were “not what we in the Labour Party want to see”.

For its part, the last time BMA members took industrial action, during the 2016 junior doctors’ strike, the union sought to curtail the stoppages at every opportunity, eventually selling out the strikes in a craven capitulation.

Despite the government imposing a 3 percent pay “rise” on NHS staff last year, and the NHS Pay Review Board likely to recommend a below inflation rise this year of only 4 or 5 percent, none of the health unions have announced concrete plans for strike action. The votes of their members in various “indicative” ballots are used as bargaining chips to persuade the employers to “negotiate”, which almost invariably ends in a

sellout, and to preserve the role of the union bureaucracy as a management partner.

The unions are not the organisers of class struggle to defend the interests of working people, but its saboteurs. They are an industrial police force that divides workers by sector, location, and profession, cutting across all forms of unified action and stifling strikes by agreeing back-door deals.

Breaking out of this straitjacket requires new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, to be established in all workplaces. These must be led by the most trusted and militant workers, guided by a socialist perspective to replace the profit-driven capitalist system of the billionaires with one based on the fulfilment of social needs.

This is the perspective fought for by NHSFightBack. Make **contact** and link up with our **Facebook page** today.



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