

# UK nurses speak in support of national strike

Our reporters  
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In a national ballot, 300,000 UK nurses have voted to strike in a powerful show of opposition to entrenched low pay and appalling working conditions.

Nursing staff at 176 out of 311 National Health Service (NHS) organisations voted for industrial action earlier this month in the ballot called by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). It was the largest in the RCN's 106-year history and called for pay award that goes 5 percent above inflation as measured by the retail prices index (RPI). RPI inflation now stands at 14.2 percent, meaning that nurses have backed strikes demanding a pay increase of almost 20 percent.

Since 2010, the real-terms salary of an experienced nurse has fallen by 20 percent in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and 16 percent in Scotland.

The ballot results were released on November 9, after which the RCN union bureaucracy immediately sat on the vote despite declaring they had a strike mandate from members in "large swathes of the country." RCN General Secretary and Chief Executive Pat Cullen handed the initiative back to the Conservative government, declaring, "Ministers must look in the mirror and ask how long they will put nursing staff through this. While we plan our strike action, next week's [November 17] Budget is the UK government's opportunity to signal a new direction with serious investment. Across the country, politicians have the power to stop this now and at any point."

Predictably the government gave the NHS next to nothing in the budget. It was allocated an additional pittance of £6.6 billion spread over the next two years and would be run in the future according to "Singaporean efficiency" methods, said Chancellor Jeremy Hunt.

That Hunt's budget would impose deepening crushing austerity was no secret to anyone, having been trailed for weeks. But after trying to pull the wool over her members' eyes for months with claims that the

Tories could be persuaded to carry out a Damascene conversion and rush to protect the NHS, Cullen had to declare on November 17, in a letter to Health Secretary Steve Barclay, "I waited for today's Autumn Statement by the Chancellor before concluding that the government remains unprepared to give my members the support they need at work and at home." It was now "with regret" that strikes could go ahead next month, she added.

With her letter, fully eight days after announcing its strike mandate, the RCN offered the government another five days in which to "open formal negotiations" on NHS pay and patient safety "or the nursing union will announce its first strike dates and locations for December." This was after Barclay asked to meet with the union again after talks the RCN described as "cordial in tone" and "welcome."

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to nurses at National Health Service hospital trusts in the south of England about why they voted "Yes" to support industrial action.

Deputy ward sister **Danielle** said she voted to strike because "the coronavirus pandemic stretched the already-depleted NHS to breaking point. There was higher demand to shifts, increased workloads which made our shifts even tougher, but as nurses we got on with it for the greater good. Nurses have seen a tougher shifts for staff. Yet nurses have seen their real-term earnings fall by 6 percent in the last decade. This is why strike needs to happen.

"As nurses we are overworked, and patient safety is being compromised as a result. On wards that are staffed they are being penalised and moved to wards which are short to back fill the shortages of nurses

"I feel undervalued by this government, and the thought of colleagues having to go to food banks to feed their families makes me sick to my stomach, as we give everything to the NHS but get nothing in return.

It's time to say 'yes' to this strike, to safeguard the public, to save the NHS."

**Holly**, a senior nurse with 12 years of experience, said, "I voted to strike because nurses' pay is ridiculously low for the service we provide and I think it's insulting.

"We all went to university for three years and trained as registered professionals and do not get paid accordingly. Nurses and healthcare professionals are struggling financially, we work full-time and live hand to mouth every month, worrying about how to support our families financially. We haven't had a decent pay rise in years and it's time to take a stand.

"Good will has come to an end. We need fair pay to survive the new financial crisis heading our way we have already been in the breadline for years and it's getting worse.

"I've been qualified for 12 years and take about £15.50 an hour home before tax and pension has been taken away. Luckily, I have a partner and we share the cost of the mortgage, bills and food.

"But I am also the higher earner, so I solely pay for my one child's childcare which is £86 a day. It equates to £900 a month or more depending on how many shifts I have Monday to Friday. Childcare alone takes over 50 percent of my wage.

"After all that has been paid I have £200 a month disposable income. That's £50 a week I earn for myself and family. That's all I have left to buy clothes for my family and provide family activities and educational experiences for my toddler to enjoy. And with inflation rising, bills, mortgage costs, food prices going up exponentially I probably won't have this pittance left for long."

Deputy ward sister **Kirsty** said she voted to strike because of the "rising cost of living. We have been underpaid for years. Then there are staffing shortages due to pay, which mean we have to work even harder. Lack of student nurses because of the above, increasing list of responsibilities, and not being appreciated by the government, especially given the pandemic."

**Matty**, a staff resource pool nurse, said he voted to strike because, "Enough is enough! Being offered a pay increase that failed to even match current inflation is an insult. No wonder nurses are leaving the profession in droves, leaving wards dangerously understaffed. Nurses deserve better, it's time to strike to make politicians sit

up and realise positive change is imperative."

A third year student nurse said, "I voted yes for the strike action because the government's decisions mean we are struggling to recruit and retain nurses into the profession, affecting patient care, patient safety and patient outcomes. This government scrapped the bursaries for student nurses in 2017. This has proven to be a disaster. The number of students who wanted to choose nursing as their future career has fallen down massively.

"More nurses are leaving the register than joining it. Now there are more than 47,000 nursing vacancies in England alone. Nurses' pay has fallen massively despite their responsibilities and the problems they have to face day in, day out under an underfunded system. I like to be on the picket lines to defend the NHS and to fight for better pay and conditions. If we don't do it now millions of patients who depend on the NHS will have to suffer or are likely to have early deaths."



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