

Thousands attend UK March With Midwives demonstrations

Our reporters

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Thousands of midwives and maternity support workers (MSWs) protested throughout Britain on Sunday.

The March With Midwives demonstrations were highlighting the devastating crisis in maternity care, including unsafe staffing levels, low pay and cuts throughout the National Health Service (NHS). They were held in 33 towns and cities.

Many brought home-made banners with slogans including, “Save the midwife”; “Save Staffing, Save Lives”; “Midwifery is becoming hard labour”; “Midwives have had Enough,” and “Mother and Babies are not Safe”.

This was the second national protest by midwives with demonstrations also being held in November last year.

Midwives are on the frontline of a funding crisis tearing the NHS apart. Thousands more midwives are required to run a safe service. For every 30 newly-qualified midwives entering the profession, 29 leave through sickness, retirement or leaving the profession entirely. According to the survey held last year by the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), more than half of midwives (57 percent) were thinking of leaving the NHS with those who had worked for five years or less the most dissatisfied.

This month, hundreds of thousands of Royal College of Nursing members voted to strike. The RCM’s 30,000 members in England and Wales are also being balloted for industrial action only its second such ballot in England and its first in Wales in its 142-year history.

In a separate ballot, RCM members in Scotland voted to strike by an 88 percent majority at the end of October. They voted 94 percent for industrial action short of a strike.

No strike action has been announced by the RCM in Scotland since the ballot, as the union bureaucracy once again seeks to frustrate workers determination to fight. The initiative was handed to the Scottish National Party government with RCM Director for Scotland, Jaki Lambert, saying there “was still time to avert” strikes.

RCM members in England and Wales are being balloted after having already overwhelmingly rejecting a massively below-inflation 4 percent pay offer from the Conservative government in Westminster and the Labour Party-run devolved Welsh government. The union organised a “consultation” on the pay offer months ago, beginning August 1 and ending September 5. The ballot only asked midwives whether they wanted to be balloted for industrial action. The RCM then waited another month before announcing a strike ballot on October 7, with another

month passing before the ballot opened November 11. Another month will pass before it closes in mid-December.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to midwives protesting in Manchester and Leeds.

Manchester

Abigail attended a protest of several hundred in the city’s St Peter’s Square. She said, “We are demonstrating against the midwifery crisis. With the cost of living it’s really important that we acknowledge midwives and pay us fairly.

“We know the service is not safe and that midwives are struggles and its affecting the families that we are looking after.

“In the past 18 months we know that 650 midwives have left and we know we are around 3,500 midwives short in the UK.

“The medicalisation of births is becoming higher and higher and that’s due to the shortage of midwives. The less midwives there are, the less we’re there to advocate for women in terms of interventions. Women are waiting up to seven days to be induced and that’s because there’s no midwife to look after you. There’s not enough midwives on the wards and that causes an awful lot of problems.”

Explaining why she left midwifery, Abigail said, “There are a lot of reasons why midwives are leaving. But the main reasons are that we feel unsafe when we’re working. We feel that the care that we’re giving is not good enough and also it’s not safe enough for the women that we’re caring for. We’re doing the job of two to three midwives. We can work for up to 14 hours without taking a break so this is basic human rights. We don’t even have time to go to the toilet.”

Leeds

In Leeds, around a hundred demonstrated outside the Town Hall.

Anna said, “I’ve been on placement for about six weeks and seen women forced to wait days and days to be brought down to the labour ward because there is a shortage of midwives.

“We are having to take other midwives from other departments off the labour ward. Then they are doing extra hours on top of their already full-time hours, so they’re working themselves to the bone.

“The ladies who are being induced have to wait days and days and that gives them a lot of pain because obviously they are in labour waiting to go down and have their babies.

“Women’s choices are being taken away, because they are closing home birth teams. So human rights are being taken away. COVID has been used as an excuse not to run home birth teams

because they believe that women are safer in hospital, but if you look at the statistics it's actually safer for women to be at home. With less intervention, you are less likely to have surgery ending in a C-section. Being at home is better for the body to release the hormones that they need for labour because they feel safer, not as stressed.

"You go into labour and are put in a hospital to care for you and you have to wait around for hours. Your contractions stop, then you have to go on a ward where there's hundreds of other women and you don't go into labour, and this is all because of the midwife shortage. It's absolutely awful.

"I completely understand why burnt-out midwives can't come to work. That would not be safe and puts pressure on their colleagues that are picking up their duties.

"You can't tell women when to go into labour and when not, so because of that women end up having really long labours, absolutely exhausted and they have to be rushed in for a Caesarean section and the recovery is a lot worse.

"Post-natal care is diabolical as well. They don't have enough time to support breast feeding women.

"You can't quite believe we live in this rich nation and we are treating people who are birthing their children like this and the midwives who are looking after them. Babies are meant to be precious as they are the next generation. Again, you impact the mother's mental health, you impact the child's mental health, you stress the mother out you stress the baby out. Where's the support for mental health going forward?

"One shocking maternal death statistic is that women are most likely to commit suicide in the first year post-natally. The biggest cause of death in the first year is suicide.

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"Women are depressed and we don't see it and they end up committing suicide. That's a horrible, tragic thing which will impact their family and their children for the rest of their lives. These are preventable suicides.

"From a student midwife perspective, I don't understand how they expect us to learn best practice. We're running around like headless chickens following our midwives because they are so busy. How are we meant to learn everything in depth to gold standard when we can hardly keep our feet on the ground?"

Deborah Hughes said, "I have been a midwife for 40 years. I am here today because women giving birth are not getting any care and midwives' conditions have reached the point of abuse.

"Their working conditions are appalling. Midwives are leaving. A culture of cooperation and care has been replaced by one of bullying. Women get next to no post-natal care. When I started being a midwife, women had a statutory right to post-natal care and now that has been taken away. Women aren't getting any care, they are just left to fend for themselves.

"We have just heard from a speaker at the rally that the leading cause of maternal death is suicide, and that is by women who feel abandoned and unsupported, and unprepared for motherhood. That work is not being done any more because health visitors are too overworked to pick it up.

"Midwives are facing terrible staff shortages, working with no

breaks. The NHS has moved to a system of 13-hour shifts. It is 13 hours, because it is meant to be 12 and a half hours with a half hour break, but nobody gets breaks in the NHS. That's too long to be working without making mistakes. We need to move back to a system like they do in many other countries with three 8-hour shifts over the 24 hours.

"They moved to 12 hour shifts to cover the costs of car parking and cover the costs of childcare. If nurses could access childcare and affordable parking, they could go back to doing five days a week. But because salaries are so low people thought working 12 hours might be better. But it's terrible for their health and it's terrible for the standard of care being given. People are just too tired to carry on by the end of the shift.

"I suffered burnout. because there were too many callouts and too much pressure, as a manager trying to catch the service up because of the lack of staff. Every day was a crisis. Six and a half days out of seven there weren't enough staff. We are having to discharge people before they were ready, because there are not enough hospital beds in this country. We haven't had enough for many years. That was partly bound up with the pandemic. If we had enough places, we wouldn't have had to turn operating theatres into ICUs and ITUs. The surgery could have carried on.

"Cutting the beds happened in the 1980s. Then they staff hospitals according to the number of beds. But there aren't enough beds, so you end up without enough staff for the number of people in hospital. People are pushed in and out of hospital, and I know we have a social care issue, but we haven't got enough beds!

"If you had two extra wards, you'd have two extra sets of staff as well, stolen from the third world of course. It's no different to taking diamonds out of South Africa, taking trained nurses and midwives. There is so much that needs to be changed.

"There is too much management of a certain kind, non-clinical. There are too many targets. Every target has to have a management team and none of the targets are being met anyway."

Jess, a second-year midwifery student said, "When I'm on placement there's no staff. They never even get to go to the toilet. They never get to take lunch breaks. They have to take loads of patients on. It's really, really dangerous.

"I'm not sure [why the unions are not all striking together]. I really think they should be."

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