

# UK unions try to prevent National Health Service strikes by agreeing sell-out deals with government

Robert Stevens  
12 December 2022

Talks between the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and the Conservative government over the upcoming strike by up to 100,000 nurses collapsed Monday evening. This means that two 24-hour National Health Service (NHS) strikes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on December 15 and 20 are still going ahead.

This is no thanks to the RCN, which has done all in its power to prevent them.

Last month, a ballot for industrial action by the RCN of 300,000 nurses showed powerful opposition to entrenched low pay and appalling working conditions. The Conservative government is offering only a fixed sum of just £1,400. For newly qualified nurses, this is approximately 5.5 percent, and for most others around 4 percent.

The ballot called for support for a pay award of 5 percent *above inflation* as measured by the Retail Prices Index (RPI). RPI inflation stood at 12 percent when the ballot result was announced and has since risen to 14.2 percent.

Monday's talks came after the RCN said over the weekend that it was willing to call off the strikes by nurses, with their only demand that the government attend talks and discuss pay. The talks failed almost immediately, as the government attended only to humiliate the union, make a show of strength and reiterated it would not discuss the issue of pay.

RCN General Secretary Pat Cullen complained that "I needed to come out of this meeting with something serious to show nurses why they should not strike this week. Regrettably, they are not getting an extra penny."

The RCN had already ditched any commitment to an above inflation pay deal. Asked on BBC's *Sunday with Laura Kuennsberg* if the unions would accept a lower pay deal, Cullen replied, "Come to the table and let's have the discussion... It's not about lining their [nurses]... pockets with gold." By Monday morning, Cullen was telling ITV's *Good Morning Britain* that strikes could be called off "right now, this very minute" if Health Secretary Steve Barclay only

agreed to talks on pay. If Barclay did not want to meet the union face to face, it would be willing to have conciliation service ACAS take-over the talks instead.

Barclay maintained that he would be prepared to talk over NHS reforms, i.e., efficiency savings and productivity increases, but not pay, which is set by an "independent" pay review body. The RCN went ahead with the futile charade nevertheless.

The RCN wants nothing more than to strike a rotten deal with the Tories, which can be sold to nurses as some form of concession. This is the agenda of all the health unions. Writing on Monday in the *Mirror*, Unison General Secretary Christina McAnea, who heads the largest public sector union with 500,000 members in the NHS, pleaded, "Instead of upping the ante with talk of COBRA [national emergency meetings] and the army, ministers should be concentrating all their efforts on ending the disputes." She advised, "Strikes are always a last resort... A solution to the dispute is possible. In Scotland, talking to unions rather than demonising them has led to improved offers of pay and strikes being paused... Ministers in Westminster could do well to take a leaf out of Holyrood's book."

Hours later Unison and the Unite union called off planned NHS strikes by ambulance staff and other workers in Scotland, after reaching a deal with the Scottish National Party-led devolved government. The pay deal is for an average 7.5 percent—around half the RPI inflation rate—with a still below inflation 11 percent for the poorest paid.

After concluding that the unions would not fight for anything more Unison members voted for the deal, but the 57 percent majority in favour points to widespread opposition to the sell-out.

The RCN's surrender proposals were not accepted because the Tory government is intent on inflicting a massive defeat on a key section of the working class. The NHS—the UK's biggest employer—has 1.5 million workers, including 360,000 nurses and midwives. For the government

this is an existential issue, with hundreds of thousands of public sector workers having already balloted for industrial action and voting for strikes, or in the process of being balloted.

Even the threat of NHS strikes, with nurses having enormous popular support, has moved the government to forward plans aimed at suppressing walkouts and even banning strikes outright in the health sector. Last week a series of COBRA meetings were convened in Downing Street, to discuss the crushing of imminent strikes. A further COBRA was held Monday at which the final plans to mobilise the armed forces against any NHS strikes were put in place.

Asked last week if the government favoured banning strikes in key sectors, Education Secretary Gillian Keegan responded, “Well, yes. We do have some areas where strikes are not allowed as part of the contracts, so for example the military can’t go on strike and the police... what we’re looking at is: are there other areas that we should include in that? Health would be one to look at, and other areas of critical infrastructure.”

Such authoritarian measures are being considered as the government strengthens its battery of anti-strike laws with imminent plans to enact Minimum Services Level (MSL) legislation, requiring around 20 percent of services to run during transport strikes.

The working class confronts a joint offensive by both the main parties of the ruling elite. The hostility of the Labour Party was demonstrated Monday with the collapse of last minute talks over a nurses pay deal, aimed at averting upcoming NHS strikes, between the devolved Welsh Labour-run government and trade unions, including the RCN.

Labour’s vicious anti-working class agenda is epitomised by Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting. In a full-page interview in the pro-Tory *Sunday Telegraph*, Streeting declared, “We are not going to have a something-for-nothing culture in the NHS with Labour [in government].”

He said of the NHS that Labour founded in 1948, “We can’t afford to be romantic and misty-eyed about it – this is a service not a shrine.”

The *Telegraph* referred to a recent speech by Streeting in which he opposed handing over “ever increasing taxpayers’ money” to the NHS. He told the newspaper, “The NHS exists to serve patients, not itself. I’m not prepared to pour money into a black hole”. The newspaper noted, “In another recent speech, Streeting said Labour would have gone further than the Tories have in using private hospital beds for NHS patients...”

Streeting said to the *Telegraph* of the RCN’s original pay claim, “That headline demand is not one that I would be able to meet and it’s not a demand, therefore, I would make.” He

then threatened, “I’m certainly not frightened to take on vested interests. And I’m not afraid to tell the BMA [British Medical Association, who represent doctors] or other unions ‘no’.”

Streeting’s comments make clear what party leader Sir Keir Starmer, who has also denounced strikes and described the nurses pay demands as “unaffordable”, seeks to accomplish when he talks of seeking a partnership between government, business and the trade unions. He wants the unions to be officially recognised for their actual role of suppressing the class struggle in the type of corporatist set-up that has borne fruit for the SNP in Scotland.

The *Telegraph* praised Streeting in a lead editorial, warning of a “dangerous situation for the government” when “Labour’s rhetoric sounds more conservative than the Conservatives.”

Workers face a conspiracy of the Tory and Labour parties and a trade union bureaucracy whose sole aim is to sabotage and betray a mounting movement from below. Defeating these forces depends on the development of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus and controlled by the workers themselves. This would enable the working class to unify its struggles throughout the UK and to reach out to their brothers and sisters all over the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

*For further information and discussion on the way forward contact NHS FightBack and link up with our Facebook page.*



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**