

Nurses and supporters speak from UK hospital picket lines

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Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to nurses on picket lines around the UK during Thursday’s national strike. They distributed copies of the statement, “For a general strike to back nurses’ fight to defend the NHS from UK Tory government: Build rank-and-file committees!”

Liverpool

Sue is an advanced nurse practitioner of 34 years, working at Hulton Urgent Care. She joined the picket at Alder Hey Children’s Hospital.

“My [health care] trust weren’t allowed to strike [because they didn’t reach the strike threshold] but a lot of my colleagues went to other trusts to picket. It’s my day off so I came to another trust to picket, some went to Whiston, some went to the Royal Liverpool Hospital. We voted 46 percent and you needed 50 percent.

“The happy clapping during COVID is well and truly gone. Now they’re morally blackmailing nurses, but we’ve still got families to feed. We all came in to look after patients during COVID. We worked so hard during COVID; I lost colleagues to COVID. All we get at work now is, “there’s no such thing as COVID.

“You can see how the NHS has been privatised, cleaners, porters, security are all run by private companies. The PPE contracts went to MPs’ friends who made millions.”

Nurse of six years **Ashley** told our reporters why she was striking: “It’s about patient safety,” she said. “We’ve got newly qualified nurses coming into the profession and getting burnt out, realising they could go to another job for pretty much the equivalent pay and have a lot less stress and responsibility. So, until they start paying nurses adequately, we’ll continue to

lose nurses in the profession. 85 percent of shifts are short-staffed so that puts more stress and strain on new staff.

“Had I not had the bursary [which the government has ended] I couldn’t have afforded to train so it’s putting more mature people like myself, with life experience, off.

“The government are not receptive to talks. Until we have a general election nothing will change.”

Andrea, a member of the Unite union who works as an Operating Department Practitioner in theatre at Alder Hey, explained, “Some of my colleagues didn’t get the (strike) ballot paper in time. It’s got to be a paper ballot to strike. I think those who voted online in the consultative ballot thought that was the strike vote. I don’t think 40 percent was the true representation [in her department] of the strike vote.”

Retired fireman **Peter** joined the nurses’ picket. He said, “In 1977 I took part in the first ever firefighters’ strike. We got fantastic support from the general public and fellow trade unionists. So I’ve supported workers’ struggles since then. Nurses are not by themselves.

“You wouldn’t get a general strike under [Labour party leader] Starmer. The day he’s on the picket line is the day he’d get my vote.

“If millions of trade unionists came out, firefighters are coming out, if everyone came out, what could they [the government] do?

“In 1977 the TUC [Trades Union Congress] wouldn’t back our strike, we had to go and lobby them.”

A group of young nurses, qualified for three years, spoke to the WSWs at Liverpool’s Broadgreen Hospital mental health unit. “We just want more staff and fairer pay,” said one. “We want to provide the care that we want to give, that our patients deserve.”

Another said, “I’d like to know what sacrifices [prime minister] Rishi Sunak is making! They’re not beating us!”

“We have staff shortages and no beds so we’re getting patients up to 70 years old,” another nurse added, continuing, “They got rid of the two wards for dementia patients at Mossley Hill hospital. There’s just not enough beds for people that need them.”

Bath

Carlene at Royal United Hospital Bath has been a qualified nurse for 10 years. “For me and a lot of my colleagues the strike is about our working conditions. The nurse patient ratio is really high. I used to work in the Emergency Department where the ratio there is meant to be four to one and I would routinely look after maybe 12 patients queuing in the corridor.

“One instance I was looking after thirty-two patients in my corridor and it was just me on my own looking after patients that had just come in to the hospital on the back of an ambulance. I had to leave because I was worried about my practice, and I just felt that I wasn’t able to give what I wanted to give to my patients.

“I feel enough’s enough now. It was already bad before COVID but now it’s just even worse. We’re doing it for our patients is the main thing that I want people to understand [about the strike].

“Essentially, I think we need to protect the NHS. When it was established it was here for everybody and free at the point of service and it would be a shame that it would be privatised and that’s what we are fighting for as well. I haven’t moved to the private sector because I believe in the NHS and I love it.

“The NHS costs a lot of money from the government budget but I think people’s health is important and if you want a healthy society you need to put in and provide for people who need health services. There’s money in places that can be distributed to the public sector.”

Ben, a teacher, was supporting nurses on the picket line at Royal United Hospital. He said, “I’m here because I think that nurses are undervalued and underpaid since 2010—that’s 12 years of underpayment. They helped us get through COVID, they were called heroes and they are not rewarded for it.

“People need to be aware that privatisation has already happened, for example I need my ears syringing and that used to be free on the NHS. Now I have to pay £60 for it and an appointment.”

London

A nurse at Great Ormond Street Hospital with 15 years’

experience explained she was on strike for “Safety levels on the ward and fair pay—for 10 years we’ve had nothing—all those claps don’t pay our bills. And as a person that uses the NHS I’d like to see a better service.

She said strikes were taking place because, “It’s come to a head. It’s too much. The years of the pandemic, we worked our socks off. I’ve had to work through the pandemic, with two children, and look after a 98-year-old grandad.

Asked about the government’s response, she said, “They don’t live in these conditions. They’ve got their second houses, £80,000 a year; it’s easy for them to sit in their boxes.

“They want it to go private and that’s what we can’t allow.”

Another nurse told our reporters, “We’re striking mainly for patient safety, pay is a related aspect. We’re chronically understaffed, wards are unsafe. Sometimes you don’t get a proper break because you don’t feel it’s safe to do so because there aren’t enough people.

“There’s a mass exodus of nurses; people are leaving some going to the private sector because pay and conditions are better. It’s never an easy job but when you’re understaffed it makes it much, much harder. The number of nurses off with stress is huge.

“I don’t like to be a person that fights, but I feel every single day I have to fight for my patients, just for basic safe care. It gets soul destroying, and that’s why people end up leaving.

Speaking about the impact of the pandemic, they said, “We know loads of people who have been off long-term sick.”

Bradford

Mjafadui is a nurse at Bradford Royal Infirmary. He said, “I think it’s a good thing for us to come out and try to make our voice heard. It’s supposed to be common sense that when inflation goes high pay has got to be reviewed.

“If people don’t listen you’ve got to take some action. The government is taking on working people and failing to give us any recognition.”



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