

Tens of thousands of UK National Health Service nurses strike for first time

Robert Stevens
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Tens of thousands of nurses began two days of strikes on Monday. It is the first mass strike by nurses in Britain for over 100 years and the first ever in the National Health Service (NHS).

Nurses walked out at 76 hospitals and health centres for 12 hours from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. across the NHS in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The second strike takes place December 20. Nurses and supporters flooded pickets lines in many parts of the country. At the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, the picket was more than 100 strong.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members are demanding a pay increase of almost 20 percent—inflation, based on the current RPI measure (14 percent), plus 5 percent. The government awarded one million NHS staff employed under its Agenda for Change contracts a uniform £1,400 backdated from last April—just 4 percent on average to health workers. UK nurses are paid less than in most European Union countries, the US and Australia.

The nurses' strike is the most politically significant of a wave of strikes across the public and private sectors that began in the summer.

The strike was provoked by the Conservative government, which wants the defeat of nurses to further its plans to destroy much of the NHS and hive off the most profitable sectors to the private sector—depriving millions of workers of life-saving services built up over 70 years. Their plans to crush the NHS workers, numerically the largest section of the working class with massive popular support, includes mobilising 1,200 soldiers to run ambulance services.

Years of systematic underfunding, with £400 billion required just to plug cuts over the last decade, have left the NHS chronically under-resourced and understaffed.

The government's "let it rip" COVID policy, responsible for the deaths of over 212,000 people, resulted in the deaths of over 1,500 health and social care workers.

- Hundreds are still dying of COVID weekly with infections in the week to November 21 rising to over a million once again. This threatens, along with increases in flu and RSV cases, a "triple-demic" this winter amid a marked increase in the number of deaths of children from Strep A bacteria.

- NHS waiting lists have risen from around 5 million at the start of the pandemic to over 7.2 million today.

- According to a study by the *Guardian*, NHS vacancies in England alone "have risen to a new record high with more than 133,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) posts unfilled."

The strike went ahead after Conservative government Health Secretary Steve Barclay refused even to discuss the pay claim during talks on Monday with RCN leader Pat Cullen. Cullen pleaded that the strikes did not need to go ahead, after signalling the RCN would accept a below-inflation pay deal. Today, the government even rejected calls for the NHS's pay review body to update its recommendation for nurses, given the surging inflation rate since February.

Workers throughout the public and private sectors are already engaged in determined struggle against the government and employers in ongoing national strikes in the rail, postal and university sectors. Hundreds of thousands more are being balloted to strike. Mass popular support for the nurses means that their action has the potential to galvanise and unite the many disparate struggles of workers that are being isolated by a trade union bureaucracy doing everything it can to end the strike wave.

In this fight, workers are up against not just the

Tories but every institution of the capitalist state. They confront enemies just as bitter as the Tory government on the opposition Labour benches. This week Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who has repeatedly denounced strikes and banned his front bench from attending picket lines, attacked the pay claim of the nurses as “unaffordable,” with Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting ranting in the pro-Tory *Sunday Telegraph* that in office Labour would fight what he described as a “something-for-nothing culture in the NHS.”

The following day Streeting addressed parliament, acknowledging the offer by the RCN and Unison to “call off strikes this week” if the government was “willing to negotiate with them seriously on pay” and asked, “what on earth are they [the government] playing at?”

The union bureaucracy is desperate to ensure that workers are driven into the dead-end of support for Starmer’s “proud to be pro-business” party. This week the Labour-supporting *Mirror* newspaper hosted a meeting of seven union leaders involved in disputes, including Cullen. It reported, “The summit... called on Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to be ‘more vocal’ when it came to the strikes.”

This is a transparent fraud. Labour, described by Starmer as “the party of NATO,” agrees with the Tories that Britain’s major role in the war against Russia in Ukraine, and plans to confront China, mean that the ruling elite can no longer tolerate the spending of hundreds of billions of pounds on public health care, education, housing and welfare benefits. Only a few months ago, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) think-tank said of a Tory pledge to spend £150 billion more on the military in the next eight years that it would mark “the end of the peace dividend.”

It complained that “Since the mid-1950s, the UK has been able to fund the growing share of its national income devoted to the NHS and state pensions through cuts in the GDP share spent on defence.” That was no longer possible.

The same agenda of looting public spending is being carried out in every major capitalist country, fuelling an escalation of the class struggle.

The entry of NHS workers into a mounting strike wave demands the adoption of a socialist perspective, based on the fight to guarantee high quality, free health care for all and an end to its accelerating privatisation.

This can only be carried out by mobilising a unified movement of the millions of workers throughout Britain and internationally now coming into struggle against deepening austerity, and through the development of a mass movement against war and militarism.

The Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement, “For a general strike to back nurses’ fight to defend the NHS from UK Tory government: Build rank-and-file committees!”, on picket lines of nurses, rail and postal workers this week. It states, “Rank-and-file committees, democratically elected, must be formed in every workplace, to unify the growing wave of struggles based on the demand for a general strike to bring down the Tories. This fight must be waged as part of a global offensive of the working class through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).”



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