

Workers speak from the picket lines of largest nurses strike in UK history

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Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to nurses on picket lines during Tuesday’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!” and “NHS nurse and ambulance strikes face UK government, army and sellout by union leaders”.

Up to 100,000 National Health Service (NHS) nurses took action throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. They struck at nearly 80 employers, including major hospitals in London, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Bradford, Cambridge and Nottingham.

Ambulance workers throughout England and Wales are to strike on Wednesday, with a further strike on December 28.

The nurses strike over pay followed the first ever national walkout by the profession held last Thursday, in which tens of thousands participated. Nurses, representative of all 1.5 million NHS workers, are opposing the massive real-terms pay cut imposed by Rishi Sunak’s Conservative government, an average nominal rise of 4 percent, 10 percent below the RPI rate of inflation.

Last week’s action went ahead despite concerted efforts by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union bureaucracy to sabotage the only two days of national action called by the organisation in 106 years and the only ones ever in the 70+ years history of the NHS.

The RCN balloted its members to fight for a pay rise of almost 20 percent—RPI inflation, plus 5 percent. But as the first strike approached the union ditched this demand, with leader Pat Cullen stating that if the government would only discuss pay then a lower deal could be negotiated. “Come to the table and let’s have the discussion... It’s not about lining their [nurses]... pockets with gold,” she stated.

Last Friday, the *Times* reported that Cullen had made clear “the demand for a wage rise five percentage points above inflation was ‘a starting point’, in the clearest hint that her union would settle for significantly less if [Health Secretary Steve] Barclay agreed to talk ‘seriously and respectfully’ about nurses’ pay.”

The nurses enjoy massive popular support in the working class at a time when millions including rail, postal, education and other public sector employees are themselves fighting their employers and the government to demand higher pay and end to attacks on the conditions, pensions and jobs. Yet every statement from Cullen is based on futile appeal for compromise to Sunak’s class war government and apologies for going on strike.

No such compromise will emerge from the Tory government.

In a front-page interview with the newspaper reported, “Rishi Sunak warned striking unions yesterday that he was ready to hold out against their ‘unreasonable’ pay demands indefinitely. Speaking to the Mail before the biggest strike week in decades, the prime minister indicated he would tolerate months of disruption rather than risk an inflationary wage-price spiral.”

The government’s agenda is to defeat the nurses’ pay claim to set a precedent for every worker in the public sector. On Tuesday afternoon, it again refused to entertain any discussion over pay.

NHS workers are up against the entire political establishment. The Tories’ hardline is matched by the Labour Party-led Welsh devolved government, who have offered NHS workers a pay offer of between 4 percent and 5.5 percent.

There were no nurses strikes in Scotland Tuesday, after the unions negotiated a below inflation deal with the Scottish National Party administration.

Leeds General Infirmary

Rebecca, a coordinator at the Leeds General Infirmary (LGI) trauma centre, said the strike was about “the working conditions for nurses, and pay. We need to attract more people into the profession, we need more nurses on the ward, on the front line, providing hands on patient care. We need that care to be better and to do that we need better nurse to patient ratios. The only way we are going to do that is by paying a fair wage so that nurses can afford the cost of living.

“Nurses are facing £27,000 tuition fees for the duration of the course just to qualify. People don’t come into nursing for the money, but they also need a career that’s going to provide for their families through their hard, difficult work and long hours.

“I know we’ve faced a lot of austerity over recent years, and the COVID lockdown had a massive effect on the economy. But when we did go into lockdown people were paid furlough to deal with the cost of living. Now the government’s saying we cannot afford to pay nurses a fair wage for the skilled labour that they are providing.”

Sarah, a children’s nurse, said, “I left ward work because it’s not well staffed, you’re not well respected in some ways, and it’s not a happy

place to work.

"I'm stood here today because there are people on the ward who are looking after patient safety so they can't come out on the picket line. I'm stood here for all nursing, for every part of the NHS that needs more, fair pay, staffing, respect, and better job prospects.

"I don't think that the current government will provide what we need, because they've had 10 years to do it, and they haven't. There's so much going on with all of the different strikes, perhaps there is power and strength together. I'd like to think that we are highlighting what needs to be fixed in the NHS because it's not working for the people, not working for the patients."

ICU nurse **Karen** described how "I worked through the pandemic and it was awful. We all worked very hard and everyone did clap for us, but now the government have just given up on us. What gets me is seeing the government funding bonuses for bankers and cutting their taxes and then saying there is no money. They're all living their lavish lifestyles, that's what I'm against.

"They spend billions on nuclear arms, but they won't put £6 billion in the NHS. We are facing a real terms pay cut. My mortgage has gone up £200 per month, which is £2,500 a year that I am funding, and electricity bills have doubled. I am having to do extra shifts. Everyone is against the rich, the top 1 percent who are controlling us. We all want the same thing, we all want a fair life. We don't want to be scrounging for money and food and stuff."

Tracey said, "I am a nurse, have been qualified for four years. I work in the private sector. I want to support NHS nurses. I want them to pay better so conditions are better and then I would go back and work in the NHS. I think the government has been disgraceful. Not even entering into discussion, just saying 'no'.

Of the Labour Party, Tracey said, "We don't actually have any opposition to the Tory government".

John told us, "I have been a nurse for 40 years and this is the first time I have been on strike. But this is the culmination of not just this year's pay award, but decades of derisory pay awards. Also the attack on conditions and the fact that the government will not pay the staff and they won't train the staff."

Asked about Labour's role in preparing NHS privatisation under the 1997-2010 Blair/Brown governments, he said, "That's right, it has been privatisation by stealth. You find now that the only part of the NHS that is free of privatisation is frontline staff. We are the last vestige of a free at the point of care NHS. A lot of GPs have gone into private hands, all the support services are in the hands of private enterprise. It is being kept from the public in many ways. They still think that if they walk into a GP surgery that it is solely run by the NHS. Well it's not.

"I think, going forward, that Labour have one more attempt at being in power, but if they don't give the workers what they want in terms of pay and parity with the private sector, and improvements in conditions, they will probably disintegrate from within. So it will leave room for a third force to support workers and, as you say, it is an international movement now, right across Britain, Europe, America. Everyone has become wise to the one percent's tricks, and it is no longer going to stick."

Miles explained, "I started in 2016 and have seen it get worse with staffing ever since. My fear is that the government are trying to privatise the NHS and are putting everyone at risk.

"Everyone has only had about one percent in pay rises for 10 years and prices have risen. Colleagues of mine are going to foodbanks.

"A lot of countries are using the fact that COVID is no longer so prevalent as a means of cutting healthcare budgets.

"I worked in the wards during COVID. There was a period when the policies didn't line up between the hospitals and the care homes. Care homes introduced policies between themselves, because they were getting outbreaks. I remember a patient who was going to one of the care homes.

The care manager said, 'We really can't take this, we have so many people dying here'. The care home manager was in tears because they hadn't taken a break. They were overwhelmed."

"They rely on our good will. They call us on our days off, or we come in early or stay late. It's their ideology; they won't invest in a part of the country where they don't see a profit. When they supply weapons of course, it is different.

"Last Tuesday, there was some of us on strike, now there are more of us. Next time there will be more of us."

Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge

Nurse **Andrea** said, "We are short staffed all the time, so we don't get breaks, we don't get food, we don't get water, we barely get to the toilet.

"I see no sign of the government engaging at all. They are also paying agency nurses three times our wages, but they say they can't afford to pay us. One day we will all be agency nurses and the NHS will not be free anymore."

Asked if as so many workers in struggle with the government and employers could lead to a general strike, Andrea said, "If there is no answer from the government and they don't hear us then that is the next step."

Nurse **Rachel** told our reporters, "Staff shortages cost lives, they need to be paid fairly to come into the job, to stay in the job and support themselves and their family. Nurses, all the staff here, work really hard and need to be treated fairly. We are losing too many good nurses because they can't afford to live on the salary. We need to make this a profession that people want to come into and can come into.

"The government keeps saying they are giving us £1,400 this year, but that doesn't make up for all the years they weren't getting that. And the £1,400 is swallowed up by energy prices, food prices, everything.

"Nurses, health care staff, the doctors, we have been here and working hard, and most people support us. It is not just nurses. People in government have no clue. It is easy for them to say, 'we paid you enough' or 'just work harder' or 'wait your turn', but they don't wait their turn. They take what they want.

"People are fed up. It comes to a point that if you don't stand up and you don't say anything, then nothing happens and nothing changes... More people are trying to join together and if we join together then maybe change can happen. If we all say enough is enough.

"They have picked the wrong battle; they picked the wrong hill [to fight on]. To not negotiate, when there is so much support for nurses."



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