

UK ambulance workers speak from picket lines

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Our reporters
21 December 2022

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to paramedics and other ambulance service workers on picket lines during Wednesday’s national strike.

Rotherham

Glyn has been working as a paramedic for Yorkshire Ambulance Service for seven years and earlier for East Midlands Ambulance Service for 13-and-a-half years. He was employed as a miner before that.

“The biggest issue for us is patient safety. The other night I took a crew off who had worked past the end of their shift. I took the patient and ambulance off them, I stayed with that patient, and I waited five hours to hand that patient over. I then went out to another patient, who had been waiting a very long time before we could get to him.

“It doesn’t matter how many people come in the front door, the A&E [Accident and Emergencies department] don’t have beds for them. Those who need to leave can’t as A&E have no social care beds. There are big social needs that haven’t been met due to a lack of funding from government.

“For 12 years we have been having this austerity. Our job has changed, we are now going to patients, and they are waiting 8-9 hours with us. These patients are ill and distressed. They also may be COVID-positive. No matter what [former Prime Minister Boris] Johnson said, that COVID has gone, it’s still rife. We are endangering ourselves, our families. We are losing staff left, right and centre.

“Patients have died on the back of an ambulance, I thankfully haven’t had to experience that, but it is happening up and down the country. We have staff off sick. There are many members with Long COVID.

“Colleagues are leaving because of mental health. We can’t get meal breaks on time, we are finishing late, we are exhausted. This idea that a 4 percent rise is good enough is a slap in the face. We have got staff on the ambulances that are currently earning less than £300 a week take home. A 4 percent rise is £12. It doesn’t even cover the increase in petrol costs to get to work.

“I agree with a general strike, but I think we need to unite all NHS workers first. The government doesn’t want to listen to us. They say we shouldn’t strike because by law we provided cover for life and limb. Then look at what they pay us! We get called for cardiac arrests for £60 a day. Is that what your relatives are worth? NHS workers should unite but the unions haven’t done this.”

As Glyn was speaking ambulance drivers from Unison, who were not due to picket until 12 noon, drove to the entry barrier and were asked not to cross the picket line. The two ambulance vehicles both refused to cross. There was much anger at the unions for organising a strike on the same day, involving the same workers and same issues, where they were being forced to cross each other’s picket lines.

The driver explained he had worked in the coal mines and would never cross a picket line. He denounced the unions as “stupid,” questioning, “Why have they staggered our pickets? Why have they asked workers to cross your line to go to work when we are in the same dispute?” He wasn’t aware that this was going to happen when he turned up for work.

Glyn said all ambulance staff should have been striking at the same time, that workers and delegates had asked the unions to coordinate the action, but Unison had refused and directed members to stick with the staggered pickets.

Alex said, “It’s the queuing that gets us really. Hours and hours and hours. It is not just 10 minutes here and 10 minutes there. It can be three or four hours and obviously we can’t just take off and leave. We have to stay with that patient, which is our job. But it is every shift that we are three or four hours late. It is soul destroying.

“And while you have 15 ambulances stuck at a hospital you have our control shouting out for uncovered jobs that are life-threatening and there is no one to respond to it. And you are sat there with a patient who may or may not need to go to hospital and you know there is a patient out there who is potentially dying. We have the skills to save their lives but we can’t go. That is why ambulance workers are quitting and why our mental health is at an all-time low. We need to do something now, otherwise the NHS will not survive.”

Carl is a paramedic team leader who was previously a clinical supervisor for 10 years. “We have massive problems with workload. There seems to be a total disregard, from senior management and politicians. Staff are leaving, going off massively stressed.”

Asked about the role of the Labour Party, Carl said, “I watched [BBC] *Question Time* and Labour are not doing anything in Wales when they are the government... so I don’t really see that there is much difference between Labour and the Tories.

“They are trying to bring laws in to suppress us again, like the Tories did in the early 80s. I was brought up in the 60s and 70s, so I remember what they introduced. People stuck together, and in the early 80s, then they brought laws in that stopped us doing that.”

On threats to use the army against ambulance workers, Carl recalled, “I used to work in military haulage, as a driver. They did this in the last dispute, 89/90, the military came in and covered jobs.

“The wealthy are getting wealthier and the poor are getting poorer. MPs’ pay rises have been way above inflation, and yet all of a sudden we can’t pay anyone anything near inflation.”

Chris worked for 34 years as a paramedic with Yorkshire Ambulance before retiring. He returned to work as an emergency care assistant. He was involved in the national ambulance workers’ strike in 1989.

“In the past we would only do what should be emergencies, but now we do the work of everybody, including doctors. I know they are short and run down as well and that is a big problem.

“In social care it’s the same. I remember in the past when elderly people had home help. They supported elderly people. That is rare now. Now you have low-paid workers, running from job to job, who don’t get travel pay and virtually no time to spend with people.

“The elderly are not getting looked after, GP’s can’t see them, they might get a chest infection which could be treatable, but they can’t get seen. Then five days later they need an ambulance and a bed and there aren’t any beds. Nursing homes are overrun. Staff have been cut to the bone, so people fall over and all sorts of things that come together to get us in this mess.

“I said two years ago that the NHS was going to break. It is now broken. The government has cut and cut, they are privatising the NHS, which will be an utter mess if that happens. The Tory government are millionaires. They can afford their own private health care.

“We get here with a patient and then wait for treatment. People are dying not due to the strike. They have been dying for the last few years. Last week I went to Barnsley hospital with a patient. There were 12 ambulances lined up and had been waiting seven hours. I was then redirected to Doncaster Hospital and there were 15 ambulances all waiting seven hours.

“The government says there is no money due to the cost of the furlough scheme, due to the cost of COVID, due to the war with Russia, which has caused huge fuel hikes. But none of this affects them. They can afford heating, and all they need, but I visit people in their homes sat with no heating wrapped in blankets.

“I think the whole system is going to collapse. We need everybody to get together to fight and this is the start of the fight. People can’t go on like this.”

On the war in Ukraine he said, “It is all about oil and money. The enemy is always at home. We are being pushed back to being impoverished and told to do whatever they tell us. This has to change.”

Manchester

At Manchester Central Ambulance Station **Steph** said, “There’s about 140-200 staff working at this depot. We do 12-hour shifts over a 37.5-hour week averaged out over the month, without the late finishing due to workload. Retention of staff is an issue. We’ve lost about 15 in the last few months.

“I started about six years ago, and then you would have winter pressures when you would be queuing on corridors and it would be busier, whereas now I don’t think there are winter pressures. It’s just pressure all of the time.”

James said, “In one month we lost seven members of staff because of the conditions. You can spend a whole shift outside of A&E, treating patients in the back of the ambulance. The elderly or fallen might not have any injuries but they can wait up to 14 hours and have to go in because they’ve been on the floor at home for so long.

“When I started in 2018, you would say it’s a busy day if a patient had to wait half an hour. Now you would class that as good because people

can wait four or five hours for an ambulance.”

Alison, who has been working as a paramedic for 12 years, said the service was vastly understaffed. “People are waiting much longer for an ambulance now. You used to be able to get to a call in eight minutes and now you we’re looking at hours. We’re picking people up from the day before now.

Co-worker **Louise**, in the ambulance service for four years, said a nurse at the city’s Wythenshawe hospital reported the queue to be admitted was 15 hours on Wednesday morning and this has only just been reduced to 12 hours.

Alison said the entire NHS workforce of 1.5 million should be mobilised in industrial action. “I definitely think that hospitals and us ambulance staff should strike together. Because like this, one day here and there, we are not making an impact. We’re making a little dent.”

Louise agreed saying, “Yes, it should be the whole NHS out, no matter what you do.”

Thomas is a teacher who was supporting the picket. “Conditions are the same with teachers as they are with NHS staff in terms of illness, as staff go off sick, and so those left have to cover. This means that the quality of teaching goes down, which impacts on the behaviour of kids, which makes everything more difficult, which impacts on teacher retention, so things just get worse.”

Thomas had noticed a surge of viral infections. “I joined my school last year but I was a teaching assistant and this is my first year of teaching. Last week up to a third of the class were not in. Five-six teachers every day have been off. I’m not sure if it’s all COVID, but it makes everything more difficult to manage. That’s in my school in London, I’ve come home for Christmas.

“When you see other sectors going on strike, it’s good to show your support, because you’re going through the same thing. Everyone is struggling.

“When ambulance workers and paramedics say that they are overworked, understaffed and are at breaking point, it sounds like what a lot of my colleagues say. These are key workers and you know what they mean, because you’ve felt the same thing. It’s just years and decades of austerity and cuts to public spending that mean everyone is suffering.

“It’s easy for the government to say that it’s very hard to pay for everything and we are doing our best, but when you look at what they are doing, it’s all a political choice. The government is passing the crime sentencing protest bill, they are aware that a lot of people are pissed off with them, and their solution is to just make it illegal to protest.

“I’m a history teacher and I was teaching my students about the history of democracy in Britain and you see these articles about the government making it harder to protest. Studying history makes everything that’s going on more relevant, and understandable.”



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