

Striking UK ambulance workers speak

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Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with striking National Health Service (NHS) ambulance workers Wednesday. Ambulance workers in Wales will strike next Thursday, and in England and Wales on January 23.

Manchester

Ambulance worker **Allan** said, “I’m really passionate that the NHS is run for the people of Britain who need the service. I’m passionate that the NHS doesn’t disintegrate. I want to bring this to the attention to the public. I want them to see it on the TV. I want them to read it in the newspapers. And not just about how many percentage points of the pay rise we’re going to get. I want people to know what the real issues are. I want them to know that the NHS, the transport infrastructure, education system in this country is significantly at risk, because it is being seen as a cash cow. It’s been seen as a way of creating money for the government and companies.

“As a trade unionist, I want to see us come together saying we need to go beyond these piecemeal, one-day strikes, half-day strikes, in a general strike. This isn’t just a group of people who are looking out for themselves. We will come together to make sure that we can exercise the power that is ours and is rightfully there to affect how this country is run. It should be run by us and for us.”

Rotherham

At Rotherham General Hospital, there was a lively picket of over 20 ambulance workers. **Mick**, who has worked for

the ambulance service for over 20 years, is a bank (supply) worker and also works for the Yorkshire Fire Service.

“I am on strike to defend our working conditions and to make them better. The conditions are not good. There are long waits for patients and handovers. And to protect our own welfare and better pay so we don’t have to rely on overtime and have to go to food banks or ask friends for help as that is what is happening. There is so much more demand on the service. We are not just an ambulance service, we are social workers, we are security workers.

“In the ambulance service we have three main unions, Unison, Unite and GMB. We need to work together. There are different start times for strike action across the unions and on different days. We must have coordinated action as it causes a lot of stress and anxiety with members thinking they have to cross picket lines when we are on the same side.

“I disagree with the anti-union laws. I went to parliament in December, talking to politicians. They were all telling us that they were for us and their door is always open. but then said there is nothing there in terms of pay.

“The government says our strikes aren’t safe. Today we have ambulances waiting to take calls. It’s not us putting lives at risk, it is the government, through their cuts. They could have prevented this if they gave us a decent wage rise we can live off. The government won’t back down and this will continue throughout the country, across other sectors like the rail.

“I also work for the Fire Service and we are balloting. We will be all out. All the trade unions should come together and organise a general strike and fight this government. We were there for the pandemic, but clapping doesn’t pay our bills. All we want is decent pay and better conditions and patient safety and care.”

Huddersfield

Alan, an ambulance driver at the Huddersfield station, said, “I love my job. I have been doing it 20 years; I like meeting people, I like helping people when they need it. The job has diversified over the last 20 years. From being an absolute emergency cover we have to cover a variety of mental health issues, which is now becoming a very big thing. But there is a limit to what we can take on and do effectively.

“We are prehospital and very limited as far as a doctor is concerned. We are paramedics. We do three years when we pass our test and become competent and learn our craft on the job.

“The pandemic was a big shock having to wear masks and goggles, gloves and aprons while looking after ourselves and our families. A lot in the public sector thinks Covid has gone but it hasn’t. The government wants to sweep it under the carpet.

“[Business Secretary] Grant Shapps is a nightmare. He reminds me of Emperor Nero. While Rome burns, he fiddles.

“I don’t think the new anti-union laws will be accepted. It is like they want to get us back to Victorian times where we don’t have a right to withdraw your labour, which is a democratic right.

“This is an ongoing campaign. The number of staff per patient has gone down. Staff that have been here for 30 years are leaving. You can’t lose that much experience. It seems we are on a war-footing. It’s a stark contrast to how we were a couple of years ago when Boris stood outside Number 10 giving all the key workers a round of applause.”

Bradford

Lucy explained, “I work for patient transport (PTS) and I have been doing this job for eight years. I am out on the picket line to support my colleagues. We deserve more pay. We get peanuts for what we do, the abuse we have to put up with, the responsibilities. And then all of the headaches that come with the job.

“Myself and colleagues shouldn’t have to be worrying about finances, how we will be able to pay for the mortgage, put food on the table for ourselves and our kids. That obviously has an impact on your job because you start bringing your personal life to work. Finances are a big issue because everything has gone up: fuel costs, food prices, mortgages, gas and electric. That is the last thing that you should be thinking about when you are doing what we do.

“We shouldn’t have to have food banks! You should be

able to go to the supermarket and do your shopping on your wage. Instead you’re thinking, oh I’ve got £50 and I can’t go over as I’ve got to pay for the mortgage, or put fuel in my car so I can go to work. If not there are less crews out there on the road and it is the ripple effect this is having on people.

“I love what I do but it is very draining, physically and emotionally. My colleagues on the emergency rigs are suffering from PTSD and having to go off sick because they can’t get treated.

“You’re waiting so long for an ambulance that when you get to the hospital and you want to book them into A&E, colleagues are waiting 6, 7 or 9 hours. The situation is spiralling out of control.

“People need to speak up because the longer it goes on, the worse it’s going to get. I don’t think the laws about minimum service are going to go down well. We should be so grateful that we have the NHS. Those in power have private healthcare, but us workers would die without it. I’d be interested to see if you took ¾ of MPs’ wages from them and they were made to live on that, like us, and see how they fare.”

Tom said, “I don’t imagine it will be settled anytime soon. Usually strike action takes the form of ‘We want these conditions, we want this to change.’ The government says ‘no’. We strike and then it’s negotiations. This time they say we shouldn’t be allowed to do that. That’s what the new anti-strike Bill is trying to do, to limit our ability to strike in future. Their line is that it’s unsafe, but it’s been unsafe for many years. We’ve had a much-delayed response and we’re finding people dead at home after originally calling with medical conditions that on paper seem treatable.

“A month ago, I had a Category 2, which is supposed to have a response time of 18 minutes. It took us an hour and forty-five minutes and the patient had been dead for 20 minutes before we got there. We spent about 45 minutes outside the previous patient’s address trying to make referrals so that they weren’t at a high risk of falling. There aren’t enough staff. It’s heartbreaking.

“Everyone in the NHS feels we are understaffed and under-resourced. You’ve got one person doing three-or four-people’s workload and that becomes the norm. We are expected to carry on like that. The pandemic didn’t help. No one wants to join because it’s such a stressful environment across the NHS.”



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