

Striking National Health Service workers nurses speak out from picket lines

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Our reporters

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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to National Health Service (NHS) nurses on picket lines during the first day of a two-day strike on Wednesday. The workers are demanding a substantial pay rise and protesting intolerable working conditions due to unbearable workloads and budget cuts.

Many nurses brought home-made placards to picket lines, including ones reading, “Save Our NHS, Save Our Staff, Save Lives”; “Shoulder to shoulder with nursing staff”; and “Undervalued, Exhausted, Understaffed”.

Others read “Support the Nurses on Strike, Defend the NHS”; Fund the NHS, Not War”; and “For a Unified Struggle to Defend the NHS”.

Sheffield

At Sheffield Hallamshire hospital nurse **Amrash** said, “Currently nurses are working under enormous pressure. We are unable to cope, there is not enough staffing. Patients are not safe. The place I work is the stroke unit which has 28 patients. Sometimes there can be three nurses but it requires two for moving and handling if they are not completely independent. So staff are unable to manage their care needs. There is a necessary quality of care which we are not able to provide.

“There have been staff dropping out and this is not good for the patients. Sometimes we are unable to provide care on time, it can be delayed, people have to wait long hours.

“The pay is terrible with all the energy prices going up, we are needing a pay increase every month.”

A student nurse said, “Being quite new to the system it seems like there has not been the safe level of staffing there should be.

“There is no incentive to be going into nursing, especially when you see colleagues overcome with the amount of stuff

they have to see. I have nothing but empathy for full-time student nurses who are putting themselves in debt for a profession that is a struggle.

“We don’t want to be here, but we are. They [the Conservative government] won’t make an offer and then we can start talking. They are not even entertaining that right now. This is the first time I have been out on strike... Safety for the patients is what we want more than anything, and this is for safety, it is not just about pay.”

Dave Miller, an RCN regional officer said, “What has happened over at least the last 12 years: the amount of staff has been reduced to totally unacceptable levels. The population, particularly of the elderly, has been increasing and there has been no further investment. What we have seen is an erosion of the NHS through privatisation, taking the form of selling off the most profitable parts of the NHS as businesses and the subcontracting out of things like hip and knee replacement surgery to private sector providers.

“It has got to the point where nurses just can’t afford to work. The starting salary for a newly qualified nurse is about £27,000, which, with the debts they come out with after university training, is just totally unacceptable.

“The rates of pay over the last few years have meant that nurses’ pay has reduced by around about 18 to 20 percent. This year’s pay award is just another insult and that was before we got into the situation we are in with high inflation.

“Shifts are over 12 hours. The problem is the lack of staff. Over these hours, people can’t get breaks, despite it being a legal requirement of the working time regulations. What has happened over the years, and this is across the NHS, where staff are reduced, it means more pressure on the ones who are left, so less staff are doing more work with no breaks. So you have massive burnout, and then you have things like COVID.”

Manchester

On the picket line Manchester's Christie hospital, **Sarah** said, "I'm one of the specialist nurses at the hospital. One of the main reasons for being on strike is about safe staffing levels, safety for our patients. It's not just about pay. We're one of the largest groups of staff in the UK and I don't think as nurses we've used that voice. This is the first time we've ever done it [strike] and I'm proud we've done it."

Sev has worked as a research practitioner and a health care assistant at Christie hospital for four years. He said, "I'm on strike because the conditions are really bad, as we don't have safe staffing levels, and we need more support from management.

"It's demoralising not having enough staff, when you know that the work is never going to end, you will never keep up with demand, you want to provide a good service, and care for the patients, but you can't as there aren't enough of us.

"We need decent pay, but what the government is offering isn't good. Inflation is a lot more than the pay increase that has been offered. The union are supporting us, but they need to do more and step up what they are doing. A pay rise would help to increase staff, and we need more hospitals as well.

"Over the last 20 years we have a lot more patients who are living longer, but we have the same number of hospitals, so we need more for any civilised system to work.

"The government should've already provided better working conditions, and better pay so that we didn't have to go on strike. I don't know why other hospitals haven't come out, it's probably a failure in the management, the union, and the system. We should all work together to sort this out.

"It's good that other sectors are coming out on strike, but this is the health service, which is vital. Everything is failing to some extent like transport, and it needs to be recognised."

Bol, a film producer, came to the picket line to support the nurses. He said, "I have come down here in support of the nurses, who are on strike here outside the Christie.

"I think what is dawning on lots of workers in this country is that not only do they have an enemy in the shape of the Conservatives, they have no friend in the shape of the Labour Party either."

Referring to the comments of the Labour Party leader and his shadow health secretary who have denounced the nurses' pay demands as "unaffordable" and advocated NHS privatisation, Bol said, "With the kind of comments coming out from those people, [Sir] Keir Starmer, Wes Streeting, they clearly want the NHS privatised as well as the Conservatives.

"So workers have to unite along a very different line than party political lines. They need to see the bigger picture and realise that they have each other. They have fellow workers that they need to rely on in order to unite and get things done."

Isle of Wight

The Isle of Wight NHS Trust did not meet the legal 50 percent ballot threshold for strike action. Only 237 of the 568 RCN members voted, with some nurses reporting not receiving ballot papers in time. Of those voting, an overwhelming majority—86 percent (205 members)—supported strike action.

The Trust reveals the arbitrary divisions imposed by this balloting requirement, as its drug and alcohol support unit is provided by Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust (MPFT), which did meet the ballot threshold. RCN members from MPFT, supported by striking nurses from Solent Trust, mounted a picket. Other health workers also stopped in solidarity, and there was public support from passing motorists, including public transport workers.

Claire, a clinical lead Registered Nurse at St Mary's Hospital, has 27 years' experience in the NHS, and spoke of the catastrophic situation the health service is now in. "I've worked through good times, I've worked through not so good times in the NHS, but this is unprecedented—well, the fact that the RCN has never [gone on] strike! We've not been here before, and it sickens me to the very core."

She pointed to emergency care as an example of the crisis. When she trained, she said, "A four-hour breach in A&E was like 'Oh my god, you want to avoid that!' They'd put the fear of god into us if we dared let someone breach that—[now] that's the norm! We're letting people sit on trolleys, or worse than that, in chairs, in corridors, in staffrooms, 12 hours before they get a placement, and it's appalling."

This was the result of "de-investment in the NHS for 12 years. Staff have received below-inflation pay rises year on year and now they're not surviving. We need to be here not just for us, but for our colleagues as well."



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