

UK nurses speak from picket lines

Our reporters
20 January 2023

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to nurses on the picket lines during the 48-hour strike across England on January 18/19. Nurses and other National Health Service (NHS) staff are fighting a government imposed £1,400 pay award backdated to last April, worth on average just 4 percent—well below the RPI rate of inflation at 14 percent.

London

On the picket line at King’s College Hospital, London, **Julie** said, “At the moment I’m in my final year of doing my nursing. I’ve been a healthcare assistant for 20 years and I want to go into this job getting a good salary. That’s why I’m joining the nurses strike today.

“Sometimes the staff come into the NHS and then they leave and go to private or agency because they get more pay.

“So why not pay more in the NHS and keep them in the NHS, rather than leaving these staff to go out and do agency work and bank shifts somewhere else? Then the NHS ends up paying somebody else [an agency] to pay these staff that money—it’s ridiculous isn’t it?

“If you don’t take care of your nurses, how can the nurses take care of the patients? If you can’t look after yourself, you’re going to come into work stressed and can’t give proper care.”

Asked about the Conservative government’s draft anti-strike laws which require a proportion of workers set by the business secretary to come into work during strikes, Julie said, “They are going to infringe people’s human rights. This [strike] is about letting our voice be heard. The government are bullying us into just taking what we’re given. If people aren’t allowed to strike it will be worse in the NHS because people will get sick or go somewhere else to work.

“You’re doing your best to save lives and the government doesn’t care about you.” The fact that nurses risked their lives providing care during the pandemic, Julie said, “doesn’t make any difference to them.”

“The government is not helping working-class people. You’re working and you can’t even pay your bills. Some people are losing their homes. Their children can’t get a proper

meal. All the industries are striking—what does that say?”

Samantha, a nurse said, “I’m here because staffing levels are atrocious. There are wards that some days don’t have nurses at all when they should have seven. Who is caring for patients when people are off sick because they’re so run down?”

The government’s 4 percent pay offer “is a slap in the face,” Samantha said. “We need better pay. With the amount of work there is, who will want to do it for the amount of pay we get, especially with the price of everything going up?

“I know people worried about how they’re going to make the rent. You get paid and it might only cover rent, then you’ve got to do bank shifts to try to cover your other utilities. I’ve had to pick up shifts. And the more shifts you have to pick up, the more run down you get—on top of COVID and the flu.”

Asked about the broader strike wave, she answered, “Well done to everyone, because enough is enough. The public sector needs funds. I find it insulting that, for the people who serve the public, there’s no funds available, apparently.

“I still want to know where all that PPE [personal protective equipment] money has gone.” Our reporter raised the massive profits made by major corporations throughout the pandemic and Samantha responded, “But not the workers. That speaks for itself of what they think of the workers.

“Strike—everyone strike. If the workers don’t work, they [corporate bosses] can’t get their pay, they can’t get their dividends.”

Molly is a nurse who works in intensive care. She was on the picket line to support her colleagues but was required to be on duty to respond to emergency cases.

“I’m here to show support because we need to get paid more. The amount of nursing vacancies out there, it’s just totally unsafe. That’s why we are striking, for patient safety. Every day we are short-staffed. If you ever need to pick up a shift, you don’t need to ask twice. There are vacancies in every department.”

Molly supported all workers unifying their struggles saying, “It’s sad that it has had to come to this but hopefully it will make a difference.”

“It was difficult during Covid. Staff were getting ill, causing a bigger issue with the understaffing problem. It took a toll on our mental health, for sure. It was a tough time for patients, families and everyone working in the hospitals.”

The cost-of-living crisis is affecting us “massively,” she said, “just like it’s affecting everyone. It’s hard. We have to work extra hours just to meet our basic needs.”

York

Mike is originally from the United States and has lived in Britain for 27 years. He has worked as an NHS nurse for 20 years. On the picket line at York Hospital on Thursday he said, “York is one of the most expensive places in the UK; the increase in house prices here has had a huge, huge impact on people. Most people that are qualifying—doctors, nurses—cannot afford to live in York.”

He was striking because “over a protracted period of time nurses have been paid inappropriately. There has been pay rises but when you compare it with the rate of inflation and everything else and in proportion other nurses in other counties it has not happened.”

“I think nurses have to make a stand. In the long term you need to protect the public, protect the patients. You need the staffing ratio to do that and the nurses need to be paid appropriately”.

“They [the government] could be using this [NHS crisis] to privatise the health service. The health service came into existence in the 1950s and I believe it was the greatest single invention for the world, as far I’m concerned. Providing a health service for the whole country was quite ambitious and big. When I go to America people are losing their houses and their livelihoods to pay a health bill.”

Emma, a nurse for six years, has been a ward nurse at York for two years. “The main thing [causing the strike] is staff shortages and the pay does not represent what we do. It’s about safe staffing levels to work in and safe working conditions. It isn’t always about pay itself, it’s the whole process we work in. To attract nurses we need to change these conditions.

“I think the NHS is jeopardized because the core of the NHS is nursing and we run the day-to-day NHS. Lots of nurses have left the NHS because of the staffing levels and the more staff that leave the NHS the more difficult it is to recruit staff.

“Potentially there is a route to privatisation taking place. I hope not because I love the NHS, I love my job and we need it. It is integral to every community you go in; it is an integral part of people’s lives. We need to be heard to make this safe for the people and the patients.”

Emma said that all nurses should be out on strike with other workers. Of strikes set to take place on February 1 involving civil servants, train drivers, teachers and university workers, she said, “I don’t know why we are not involved in the February strikes.”

Of the Royal College of Nursing stating it would be prepared

to accept a pay settlement of 10 percent, as opposed to the 19 percent raise that nurses were first balloted over, Emma said, “Nineteen percent was a fair demand and it’s frustrating that the demand has been reduced.”

Cedric and **Emanuel** are nurses who came to Britain from Africa. Cedric said, “We are here because we really need to make our voices heard by the government. They are not willing to meet us halfway. We have to continue with the strike.

Emanuel said, “If the government is not ready to give way, we are not ready to back down. It’s not just about the pay. Many nurses are leaving the NHS and nurses are not coming in. The general public are the ones that are suffering.”

Cedric said of the sporadic, divided programme of strikes organised by the trade unions, “If the unions could work together and not separately, it would be more powerful and they could deal with the government”.

Barnsley

Rachael, a nurse for eight years, works in the emergency department at Barnsley Hospital. She said the crisis in the NHS “is massively demoralising for staff because we’re spread so thinly now. It’s frustrating because we can’t give patients the standard of care we want to deliver and that they deserve.

“It’s got to a point now that we have to stand up for what we believe is right and what we believe is best for patient care. Staffing numbers are the biggest problem because we haven’t got enough nurses. The other side of it is we are losing our most experienced nurses because they are leaving the profession, so we are losing that skill and experience. When people join the profession we’re not able to support our new staff as we should, to nurture them because we haven’t got experienced nurses to do so.

“Pay is one aspect that is causing people to leave the profession. We’ve now got nurses who are struggling to put food on the table and having to use food banks. They work hard and under a lot of pressure, and they deserve fair pay for what they do. If we start paying nurses fairly we can stop all these nurses leaving the NHS and stop losing all this skill and experience.”



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