

Striking ambulance workers speak on strike in England and Wales

Our reporters
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Thousands of ambulance workers represented by the Unite, Unison and GMB unions struck again Monday across Wales and most of England. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited pickets around the country.

Sheffield

In Sheffield, newly qualified paramedic **Lewis** explained, “There are people who are calling for emergency ambulances and they take hours to get there. People calling with time-critical symptoms, and they are not getting ambulances until it’s far too late, leading to fatalities.

“I am very appalled that healthcare, which was very well thought of during COVID, has been let down massively, and by the fact they are trying to privatise it. Being charged for healthcare is criminal. It is a human right and I think we all deserve free healthcare and an amazing health system.”

He continued, “The NHS can’t even provide the basic minimum at the moment. In my opinion, they [the government] are running it into the ground, in order to then sell it to their corporate friends.”

Asked about Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s support for the expanded involvement of the private sector, Lewis replied, “It doesn’t surprise me too much.” He described the government’s anti-strike laws as “draconian”.

Tristan told our reporters, “Emergency care is on its knees. There are periods of time when it’s fair to say that there is, hour to hour, no real functional emergency care for patients.”

Asked his views on Starmer’s declaration that the

NHS is “not a shrine”, he replied, “I’m not massively surprised by that. If I remember correctly [Labour Shadow Health Secretary Wes] Streeting’s had quite a big donation from some private healthcare lobbies as well. So, to me it seems quite clear which direction they’re going in.”

“I was livid to hear [Tory Health Secretary] Steve Barclay say that NHS staff have to work harder to earn more pay, after everything we’ve been doing for the past couple of years. We’re all absolutely working our socks off just to keep the ship afloat.

Then it was even more disappointing to hear Keir Starmer say that we need to adopt a ‘can do’ attitude in the NHS. He’s talking about people that are literally making do and mending to provide other care to people. Then you’ve got Wes Streeting picking fights with the BMA [British Medical Association] and GPs and everything. I do often wonder what planet these people are from.”

“It’s the austerity consensus at the end of the day. They’ve all got the same goal going forward. Cutting is good, spending is bad.”

Leeds

In Leeds, ambulance practitioner of eight years **Lyndsay** said, “The last wage rise wasn’t even up to inflation. We are nowhere near peak inflation, and in the last eight years I’ve worked for the service, the wage rise hasn’t met inflation at all. So, this has been going on for some time.

“The repercussions of that are about retention of staff. At the ambulance service, and the NHS overall, staff

are leaving to get better paid jobs—a job that doesn't have as much responsibility, where they are not working night, they are not working weekends, they are not working the demands that we work. There are some of the nurses doing 13½-hour shifts.”

Government cuts and underfunding, she explained, have created huge “waiting times for patients: going to GPs, going to hospital appointments, waiting times for ambulances with patients, waiting times for ambulances taking patients to hospital. I myself have waited six hours with a patient in hospital corridors. We [ambulances] are an emergency service that has enough treatment to get a patient to hospital; we've not got treatment to be lasting hours and hours before we are handing the patient over at the hospital.

“People are dying because they're waiting in hospital queues. I obviously can't speak about things, as they are confidential, but I do know it is happening.”

Lyndsay said the government was working to “make rich people richer and the poor poorer and we are trying to stop this and to make the public aware of what's going on.”

She added, “The cost of living is affecting every sector. My fuel bills have doubled in price; I can't believe how much I have to pay. I've had to make cutbacks. Food has gone up; I've had to make cutbacks in food. It affects me and I think it affects every working-class person and everybody has had to make cutbacks.”

Strikes, said Lyndsay, “are ultimately in the public interest. People need to work together, to get something that meets inflation. From the three strikes that we have done, the public support has been absolutely massive.”

Joseph, also on the Leeds picket line, said he and his fellow workers were striking “to try and improve conditions for everybody. Mainly to improve conditions for patients.”

He told our reporters, “If there were a general election, I don't know if I would vote—I don't think I could be persuaded either way or know who had my best interests at heart. I don't know if the NHS would be better off in Labour or in Conservative hands, I really don't know.”

On Tuesday, on a picket line in Aintree, near Liverpool paramedic Dave said, “We've lost all sense of respect and value for life.”

Referring to the impact of huge workplace stress, he asked, “Is it right that health professionals should be attending to health professionals who want to commit suicide or have committed suicide? Is that not a crisis people should be worrying about?” He described the situation as “mortifying.”

“If you take away all the emergency services, the nurses, ourselves, and these hospitals, this government wouldn't last an hour. It'll either be a general strike or maybe a revolution.”

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Liverpool