

Thousands of NHS physiotherapists in England strike for first time

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Thursday saw more than 4,200 physiotherapists and support staff take 24-hour strike action across England. This is a first for members of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) who have not taken strike action since the organisation was founded in 1894.

On the picket lines many held hand-made placards—as have striking nurses—to emphasise the fight for a pay rise requires a broader struggle against crippling cuts to the National Health Service (NHS) budget, intolerable working conditions with patient care placed at risk.

These read: “Underpaid, Understaffed, Overstretched”, “Patient safety must come first”, “Broken and Broke”, “Striking because we care”, “While the Tories were drinking we were sinking”—a reference to the Whitehall parties held during lockdown by senior Conservatives including current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

These sentiments found no expression in the CSP official placards which simply read “Value NHS Physio Staff#CSP4FairPay”.

During the industrial action physiotherapists continued to provide emergency cover including intensive care and respiratory on call services.

On the picket line outside Royal Derby Hospital, Roz, who works as a hand specialist and has been with the NHS six years told *Derbyshire Live* she was “scared that if one of my family members were to need the NHS, it would not give the care that I would like them to receive. That’s not because of a lack of will or a lack of skilled staff, there’s just not enough staff, time, beds or resources.”

“It’s now acceptable to discharge someone home while they’re doubly incontinent and need care four times a day. That’s a line I wouldn’t have crossed six years ago when I started working” she said.

Her colleague Emily added, “We’re asked to work overtime and not always paid for it, and we’re asked to do extra shifts which affect our well-being.”

Hayley Kidger, a senior oncology physio at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, highlighted the impact low pay was having on NHS staff. “NHS trusts should not have

to have foodbanks, it’s ridiculous, they shouldn’t have to support their staff that way,” she told the Press Association. “Why would you come here, and put your heart and soul on the line to save someone’s life and hold their hand when they’re dying, when you can get paid more to run a Tesco?”

On the picket lines physiotherapists emphasised the issues of patient safety, stress and burnout, which have been highly exacerbated by staff shortages among physiotherapists. In one week, nine of her 18-strong team had cried at work due to stress, Hayley said.

At the same trust, team leader for the respiratory medicine physiotherapist service Greg Stretton held up a sign reading “Constant Staffing Problems”. He reported how his 18-strong team was usually four short, but sometimes even dropped as low as only six members.

“People are just genuinely burnt out, and my team has noticed the impact of that. We were having people in our office cry on a daily basis, just from being at work and the stresses of being work amid untenable pressures, patient demands and service demands,” he said.

With inflation hitting double digits since the middle of last year, like other health workers, physiotherapists have seen the real value of their pay packets eroded on top of years of wage freezes or below inflation rises. The Tory government imposed the 2022/23 pay award—a flat-rate increase of £1,400—on all NHS staff, including physiotherapists, for whom it equated to an average rise of 4.74 percent. Taking inflation into account it constitutes real terms pay cut with the CPI measurement currently standing at 10.5 percent and RPI at 13.7 percent.

A newly qualified physiotherapist starts on only £20,278 a year in England, approximately £11 an hour, just 58 pence more than the 2023 minimum wage in the UK of £10.42 (for those aged 25 years and over).

CSP members had voted in December in favour of taking strike action in England (84 percent in favour) and Wales (89 percent), with an average 54 percent turnout. Although a clear majority of CSP members voted to strike, anti-strike laws require a majority in each individual health trust, with

at least 50 percent of those eligible to vote participating before strike action is legal. As a result, a strike mandate was only obtained in 119 NHS trusts in England, out of 219.

As with the other health unions, the CSP has only called out a fraction of their membership with a mandate to strike at 119 trusts in England and all eight health boards in Wales.

Thursday's strike involved physiotherapists and support staff at 30 trusts in England, with a second stoppage at 33 trusts set for February 9.

In Wales, physiotherapists at the health boards are expected to walk out on February 7.

In Scotland, the Unite and Unison unions pushed for acceptance of the NHS pay award proposed by the Scottish National Party/Greens government, worth on average just 7.5 percent. The CSP also urged its members to accept and so they are not participating in the strikes alongside their colleagues in England and Wales.

This highlights the fundamentally divisive role that is played by all the union bureaucracies. Rather than seeking to unify all health and care workers in a joint struggle for a pay rise that makes up for years of pay losses, now further worsened by rampant inflation, the struggles of NHS workers in the different parts of the UK are kept isolated.

The division is further compounded by the fact the unions representing different sections of NHS staff—nurses, doctors, radiologists, physiotherapists and all the support and administrative grades, etc.—are conducting completely separate campaigns.

In a union video on the day of the action CSP chief executive Karen Middleton described members as being at the “end of their tether” while also “on their knees”. The latter is a more apt description of the position of the leadership which is reining in the growing resistance.

Middleton issued the plaintiff, “The call is for the government to come to the table with some tangible offers so that we can negotiate.”

CSP members should heed the warning provided by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) with General Secretary & Chief Executive Pat Cullen abandoning the demand for a RPI + 5 percent inflation-busting increase and offering to settle for a below inflation award (10 percent) instead. Having recommend its Scottish members accept 7.5 percent, it is already clear the CSP leadership are willing to settle for a well-below inflation award in England and Wales.

Faced with demands for joint action between NHS workers, the first day of the two day strike on scheduled for February 6-7 by nurses in the RCN will be joined by ambulance workers in Unite and GMB. This has been billed as the largest strike in the history of the NHS. But Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated last week that it is only intended to prepare for intensive negotiations with the

government aimed at ensuring the strike does not take place. Graham pleaded that a “double-digit” offer would be enough to call the action off and take a below inflation proposal back to the membership.

Unite, in keeping with the dividing up of NHS workers across the UK, called out 4,000 of its NHS members on Thursday at five health trusts and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. The action covered 20,000 NHS workers in other unions, including Unison and Nipsa involving nurses and support staff.

Health workers have repeatedly shown they are willing to fight to increase their pay after years of cuts, improve working steadily worsening conditions and so provide a better and safer service for patients.

Not only have the union bureaucrats shown over decades that they will not conduct such a fight, in the face of mounting class battles they now refuse to bring the strength of the health workers forward in a unified struggle. This refusal is contrasted with the employers and a government determined to impose on the working class the costs of hundreds of billions handed to the banks and corporations in bailouts during the pandemic.

The ruling elite insist a real terms pay increase for NHS workers is “unaffordable” or would “fuel inflation” but are spending billions funnelling weapons to Ukraine in the NATO proxy war against Russia.

Health workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace. These committees would unite the fight of different health professions and form links with other sections of workers in struggle to organise a general strike. This is the perspective advocated by NHS FightBack. Make contact today!



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