

National Health Service nurses continue strike, as UK government rejects concessions

Our reporters

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Hundreds of thousands of National Health Service (NHS) nurses held a second day of strikes Tuesday. The action by Royal College of Nursing (RCN) members was joined in England on Monday by almost 12,000 ambulance staff, paramedics, emergency care assistants and call handlers.

Strikes were held over 12 hours each day from 7.30 a.m., with emergency cover provided.

Monday's joint action by nurses and ambulance workers was the largest strike in the NHS since its foundation 75 year ago.

NHS staff are fighting a government imposed £1,400 pay award backdated to last April, worth on average just 4 percent.

The strikes would have been more powerful but for the treacherous role of the RCN, agreeing last Friday to ballot on a pay deal proposed by the Labour Party-run devolved Welsh government. The deal offers a miserly extra three percent in pay for the current financial year, taking it overall to just seven percent. Just 1.5 percent will be consolidated and the rest made up of a one-off payment. The RCN offered the deal as the basis to end strikes in England.

The Conservative government insisted that there was nothing to discuss and NHS employees in England—the vast majority of its 1 million plus workforce—would receive its already imposed 4 percent and no more.

The prostration of the health unions bureaucracy and all the unions overseeing disputes in the rail, postal and telecoms industries, and among civil servants, has allowed the Tory government to deepen its offensive against the entire working class. The Sunak government is pushing through a draconian anti-Strikes Bill and criminalising protest in a new Public Order Bill passing through Parliament.

WSWS reporters spoke to nurses and paramedics on picket lines during the strike.

Ethnea, a practice development nurse at St Thomas' Hospital, London, said, "It has been 10 years of underappreciating the nurses. And I've felt that. We constantly get lower pay rises than inflation, and you feel so undervalued." Her colleague **Rebecca** added, "Blame Labour for that; they got rid of inflation rate pay rises."

Newly qualified nurse **Annie** said, "It's not ideal for me to be given nine or 10 patients who are very poorly in an oncology

hospital, which will just put off future young nurses. The government is trying to mask the actual reasons for what is going on in the NHS, and that it depends on our good will to carry on. But that's running out now, because patients are not safe.

"I also think that there's not been a big enough push back from the Labour Party and that the public is finally starting to work this out, with all the strike action across the country. We've had rallies across the country, but we need everyone to come together across the public sector, firefighters, nurses, postage, rail workers, everyone. I agree with a general strike, there needs to be a big change in how the public sector is run."

Rosa, a cancer research nurse originally from Spain, has worked at the Christie hospital for five years. She said, "People are finding it more difficult to get GP (general practitioner) appointments, and referrals to a consultant through GPs... The earlier cancer is caught, the more chance there is of getting rid of it.

Condemning the fact that at the start of the pandemic the elderly were discharged from hospitals without being tested for COVID, Rosa said, "During COVID, social care nurses with a lot of responsibility, who are paid very little, got infected and died."

Christie's nurse **Hanna** said, "The strike is about a lot more than just pay. Right now the wards are at breaking point. We're coming back from shifts feeling anxious about leaving patients on an unstaffed ward. We're staying behind late because there's no staff to hand over to. And we don't have time to give the care that we want to. I'm continually ticking off the set jobs that I have, which means that I don't have time to sit down with patients."

Retired Spanish and psychology teacher **Frederick**, who came to England from Chile 46 years ago, joined the nurses' picket outside the Christie. He was accompanied by his daughter, a civil servant, who was on strike Wednesday over pay and conditions. He said, "The European countries and the UK are sacrificing their health services and the economy in order to support the geopolitical objectives of the US in the war against Russia in Ukraine, to support the crumbling hegemony of the US in the world. The war began because NATO and the US were gradually surrounding Russia. Russia felt threatened

and was provoked into war... The US doesn't want a competitor, Russia, in its main arena."

Carlos, a paramedic on strike in Bradford said, "We've had 10 to 13 years of austerity with cuts here there and everywhere. Ultimately pay is not our main issue, its working conditions. Pay over the last 10 years or so has gone down by 25 percent for ambulance staff. With inflation nowadays its affecting us massively. We've got staff here going to foodbanks and we've got our own foodbank here on station because staff can't afford the basics; teabags, milk, bread, the simplest of things.

"We are losing so many staff in droves. Thousands of people are leaving the ambulance service and the NHS in general. Even the doctors are looking to strike. I think a general strike would make a big impact. All of us united.

"I believe they are out to break the working class like in 1984 with the miners' strike and create divisions. I believe the NHS has been run down to bring about privatisation from hospitals to care homes. Literally everything has been outsourced at a greater cost.

"The unions aren't what they used to be. Unfortunately, there's been some intermingling between unions and governments and that happens in many other countries. The unions are more on the employers' side rather than the workers."

Jess, a staff nurse at Bradford Royal Infirmary said, "Loads of nurses are leaving and I was really lucky because I was in the last cohort of nurses who got a bursary to train. But now to have £27,000 in debt from tuition fees alone let alone expenses that go alongside, that it's just not feasible. You've got a £27,000 per year starting rate. There needs to be some incentive to do the training.

"I feel that we are going to lose the NHS at some point. If our health care goes how much are things going to cost? People are going to be in for a shock and they are really going to suffer.

"We've already had flu, Covid and most of us have had Covid ourselves. People are suffering from Long Covid from the first round and Covid's not gone away. We have still got Covid cases in the hospital. People are still dying from it, but they don't publish the figures now.

"The government have been openly corrupt. They say they haven't got any money, well how did they have £29 million spare to pay for dodgy PPE?"

Louise, a nurse with 14 years' experience was on the picket line at Royal Hallamshire hospital. "We don't want to be on strike, but we feel he need to raise our voices and we have received a lot of public support.

"Over the last decade we've lost around 13 percent in real wages. This is about the future of nursing and the NHS. There are people leaving and not enough recruitment. If you are not paid enough to feed your family and pay the bills you will look for work elsewhere. This needs to change.

"It is not just a crisis of underfunding in the NHS. It's happening everywhere. That is why so many are on strike. I am

sickened by the fact that those who stood on the doorstep to lead a clap for NHS workers are now saying we are not working hard enough.

"The issue of affordability comes down to priorities. It is business and profits put before people's health. This is about the future of the NHS, assuming we keep it and it is not privatised. You cannot run the NHS as a business. Patient care must come first."

Sue, a nurse of 40 years was picketing at Worthing Hospital. She said, "We're out here for the future of the NHS! We are qualified nurses, and we love the NHS. We've been working in it for years, and we've seen it crumbling. We've seen staff shortages. We've seen nurses stressed out and walking away from jobs that they love because they can't give the care that they want to be able to give to the patients. Nobody wants to come to work and do a bad job. You want to come to work and do the best.

"Pay rises haven't kept up with inflation, so it [the government offer] is like a pay cut.

"The big problem is the lack of staff on the wards. If there were more staff, they would be able to give a good level of care, they'd have job satisfaction, their patients would be well cared for and the nurses would be happy. It would be a win-win situation. Attract the staff in, retain the staff that you've got. With poor staffing levels, day in, day out, you don't give a good quality of care, and you lose your job satisfaction. You're miserable. You feel undervalued. Who wants to do that for a living?... I feel that the nurses deserve more."

A WSWS reporter noted that when it comes to funding the war in Ukraine to the tune of billions of pounds there is unlimited money available, but not for the health service and other vital public services. Sue replied, "If something matters enough to them, they find the money."

Olivia Summerville, an emergency department nurse at Arrowe Park hospital, said nurses were striking because, "We're sick of nursing on corridors, we're sick of working every weekend, we're sick of having to use credit cards and going on agency work to work extra shifts. We're sick of not being able to look after our patients properly."



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