

12,000 ambulance workers begin new round of strikes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland left isolated by RCN calling off nurses' action

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Ambulance workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland struck again this week for a real terms pay increase and in protest over insufficient staffing levels and risks to patient safety.

As they did so, they confronted a stab-in-the back by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union's announcing Tuesday evening the suspension of strike action planned for next week, on the cynical pretext that Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had agreed to enter pay talks.

The action by ambulance workers is the latest in a series of strikes since last December against the pay deal imposed on National Health Service (NHS) workers by the Tory government of around 4 percent for 2022/3. An "improved offer" of an additional 3 percent from the Labour-run Welsh Assembly was rejected emphatically last week by ambulance workers.

But the health unions are continuing to divide opposition and sabotage a general counteroffensive by NHS workers.

Even Monday's strike by ambulance workers was a patchwork quilt, involving a 24-hour stoppage by 10,000 members of the GMB at seven out of 10 ambulance trusts in England and 1,500 in Wales. Unite members were out in the North East and East Midlands, with the strike in Wales by around 1,000 members continuing through to Wednesday as part of a three-day stoppage, with a one day walkout in the North West on the same day.

Today, ambulance staff in Northern Ireland will walk out for one day as part of industrial action by 4,000 health and social care worker members of Unite, alongside thousands of other NHS workers and teachers holding a half-day stoppage.

The ambulance strike in Wales is only proceeding after

the health union bureaucracy unsuccessfully tried to foist a pay proposal by the Labour Party-run devolved government of an additional 3 percent including a 1.5 percent lump sum.

The GMB suspended strike action, but two-thirds of its members and 92 percent of Unite members voted to reject. Despite the categorical rejection of its paltry offer, GMB official Nathan Holman "thank[ed] the Welsh government for actually entering talks".

The RCN had already suspended strike action on February 6 and 7 by nurses in Wales to put the substandard deal, with the ballot closing on February 27.

RCN leader Pat Cullen has unilaterally abandoned her members mandate for a 19 percent "restoration pay" demand. She signalled that if Tory government would only offer the same as the Scottish National Party led government deal which averaged 7.5 percent this would serve as a pretext to call off further strike action to get around the table. Both Unison and Unite led the rout pushing through the Scottish agreement among their members.

The RCN has sat on a live strike mandate of its members who rejected the deal. The GMB and Royal College of Midwives (RCM) also ignored their membership as they threw out the offer. All three unions "paused" strike action and entered talks to bring forward negotiations over the pay deal for 2023/4 using the proviso that any improved offer would pay the differential on last years offer for its last three months from January.

The RCN is recommending acceptance of a substandard deal presented by the Scottish government to NHS workers worth on average 6.5 percent with additional lump sum payments.

Last week the RCN belatedly confirmed a further strike by nurses in England at over 100 services from March 1, which for the first time would involve 48-hour continuous action. But the delay was always meant to give the RCN time to declare some pretext for avoiding action. That came today, despite the Tories offering nothing other than talks.

Meanwhile the government is using its parliamentary majority to ram through new imposing “minimum service levels” that would severely curtail workers’ democratic rights and undermine the ability of health workers to take any effective industrial action.

As was the case with the previous strikes by ambulance workers, they have arranged emergency cover to ensure response in Category 1 life threatening cases. The government is deploying Army personnel once more to drive ambulances, not to save lives but to justify state intervention against striking key workers.

For example, some 20 military personnel are expected to be deployed in the area covered by the East Midlands Ambulance Service (EMAS). According to EMAS director of operations Ben Holloway, “they will not be used to respond to emergency 999 calls,” but would handle “lower acuity patients”.

Like their colleagues throughout the NHS, ambulance workers have faced cutbacks and worsening conditions for years. As well as increasing the pressures on these vital frontline staff, this has resulted in dangerous waiting times for patients. Average response times for the most urgent Category 1 calls, involving an immediately life-threatening situation, have fallen back to 8.5 minutes (against a target of 7 minutes). Category 2 calls, which can still involve serious and potentially lethal situations such as a stroke, averaged 32 minutes, almost twice the 18 minute target.

The ambulance service received 20 percent more calls in January compared to the same month in January 2020.

Anyone who believes that NHS workers would fare better under a Labour government should consider the comments of a spokesman for the Labour administration in Wales, who described the offer of an extra 1.5 to 3 percent for NHS workers as “a strong one” and the “best we can make.”

Labour Party leader Sir Kier Starmer flew to Kiev last week to pledge that a future government under his leadership would continue to pump billions in weaponry into Ukraine. To fund this, billions more in cuts will be made to the NHS and other vital public services.

War abroad means class war at home. At the end of

January, in the *Daily Telegraph*, Starmer pledged Labour’s support for NHS privatisation. Nothing was “off limits” when it came to attacking the NHS, which should not be “treated as a shrine”, he said, repeating words used earlier by his shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting.

We urge health workers to read the statement from the NHS FightBack, “Where next for the UK’s National Health Service Workers,” which calls on workers to “seize control” of their disputes “from the trade union apparatus. Rank-and-file committees, democratically elected, must be formed in every workplace, to unify the growing wave of struggles to bring down the Tories. This fight must be waged consciously as part of the growing outbreak of the class struggle in Europe and internationally against the austerity and war policies of the world’s governments, including mass protests and strikes in France and general strikes in Italy, Belgium and Greece. Unifying these struggles is the dedicated task of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

“This industrial offensive must be linked to the demand for an immediate general election. Workers understand that the Tories cannot be allowed to remain in office. But many also know that Labour offers no real alternative. There is no way of bypassing this political crisis. There is an urgent need to build a new socialist leadership for the working class to politically organise the necessary mass movement against austerity, to defend the NHS, provide a living wage for all, eliminate COVID-19 and bring an end to war. The Socialist Equality Party is that leadership.”



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