

Royal College of Nursing moves to end nurses strike in England

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The Royal College of Nursing union (RCN) called off the national nurses strike in England Tuesday evening to begin intensive talks, aimed at a rotten sell-out.

The RCN leadership has spent months offering to call off any future strikes, with the only condition that the Conservative government agree to pay talks. Both parties have agreed to begin negotiations Wednesday.

The RCN immediately announced the cancellation of a 48-hour strike due to start March 1. Only days ago, the RCN was boasting that the March 1 action would be an “escalation” from previous sporadic 12-hour stoppages. For the first time the upcoming strike was set to include hundreds of thousands of nurses at all 100 National Health Service (NHS) Trusts who passed a strike ballot threshold, and involve staff from emergency departments, intensive care units, cancer care and other services exempted in previous stoppages.

In their determination to enforce the lowering of wages among millions of workers the Sunak government sees the defeat of the NHS strikes as pivotal. The *Guardian* noted the “rare joint statement” put out by Department of Health and Social Care and the RCN announcing the talks. In wording setting the agenda for a rock bottom pay deal, in the “national interest”, the statement reads, “Both sides are committed to finding a fair and reasonable settlement that recognises the vital role that nurses and nursing play in the National Health Service and the wider economic pressures facing the United Kingdom and the Prime Minister’s priority to halve inflation. The talks will focus on pay, terms and conditions, and productivity enhancing reforms.”

The statement concluded, “The Royal College of Nursing will pause strike action during these talks.” The government knows that in the language of the union bureaucracy “pausing” the strike is the precursor

to ending it entirely.

The framework for a sell-out by the union had already been set by repeated cave-in statements by RCN leader Pat Cullen, which began almost immediately after 300,000 nurses across the UK voted in November to reject the Conservative government’s imposition of a £1,400 fixed sum pay award. For newly qualified nurses, this represented a well below inflation 5.5 percent, and for most nurses around 4 percent.

Forced to recognise the mass sentiment of its members for a fight, last October the RCN launched what it described as the “biggest strike ballot in its 106-year history”. The RCN said it aimed to win a pay increase of 19 percent—the then RPI inflation rate plus 5 percent.

The RCN and other health unions have overseen a series of below inflation deals. In 2018, the RCN and 13 other health unions, including the largest public sector union, Unison, reached a pay deal with the Tory government, selling a miserly 6.5 percent pay “increase” as “the best deal in eight years” and bombarding members with misleading information to secure acceptance.

As soon as the real impact of the deal became clear, RCN members called for an Extraordinary General Meeting and overwhelmingly passed a motion of no confidence “in the current leadership of the Royal College of Nursing”, calling for them to “stand down”. The leadership Council was forced to step down in September that year.

In the current dispute, the union’s climbdown began immediately, with the RNC declaring it would call off the first nurses’ strike in December—stipulating only that the government agree to sit around a table and negotiate. The government’s rejection of the RCN entreaties saw Cullen declare her readiness to meet the

government “halfway” on pay and settle for 10 percent. The humiliating climbdown was not taken up by the Tories. The RCN then responded that it would consider *any pay offer* made by the government.

The RCN has already agreed a sell-out deal with the Scottish National Party/Greens government. On Monday, the RCN recommended its Scottish NHS members on Agenda for Change contracts accept the deal offering an average rise of just 6.5 percent and a miserable on-off payment (including just £387 for those in the lowest paid band). The ballot closes on March 20.

The RCN has also suspended strike action on February 6 and 7 by nurses in Wales and put a derisory 3 percent deal, (including a 1.5 percent lump sum) to a ballot closing February 27.

According to the BBC the deal set to be stitched up with the Tories in the NHS in England could be even worse! Successive Tory health secretaries have insisted for months that the NHS pay deal for 2022-23 would not be reopened. The BBC reported Tuesday, “The breakthrough [allowing talks to go ahead] was announced as the government unveiled its plans for the 2023-24 pay rise, which would come in to effect in April. It says it is willing to give a rise of 3.5%.

The broadcaster added that a source close to the negotiations “said this had opened the door for that pay award to be backdated into this year, so giving nurses and other staff, such as paramedics, cleaners and porters, an extra boost in pay.”

Any increase on these terms will be tiny and eaten up by rampant inflation. Moreover, as the talks announcement states, negotiations will centre on productivity measures imposed on an already burnt out workforce.

The calling off of the nurses strikes by the RCN follows just four days after the University and College Union (UCU) called off a national strike by 70,000 university lecturers and other higher education workers at all 150 UK universities, as they were set to hold a further seven days of strikes. UCU leader Jo Grady had not even received a concrete offer addressing members grievances over pay, conditions and pensions.

The move to sell out the nurses’ strike undermines any possibility of uniting their struggle with ambulance workers who face the same attacks from the Tory government, with thousands striking again this week. It

takes place during the same week as tens of thousands of junior doctors voted almost unanimously to strike.

The 48-hour March 1 nurse’s strike was due to coincide with action by thousands of teachers on February 28 and March 1-2.

Within minutes, RCN members took to social media to voice their opposition. In an attempt to fend off criticism, Cullen held an online 45-minute meeting Tuesday evening attended by several thousand nurses. Among the comments posted during the session were:

- “How will the RCN guarantee an above inflation pay rise, when you have agreed to enter talks around 7%? And why are we not uniting with Junior Doctors now they have got a mandate for strike action? Surely we are stronger together and can win a pay rise for all NHS staff?”

- “We have agreed a mandate to strike for pay restoration, anything less is an insult. With many quotes of what ‘we will accept’, does the RCN still push for the original ask of 17-19%?”

- “The joint statement talks about ‘productivity enhancing reforms’ - what does this mean? We are already working too hard for our mental and physical wellbeing and the safety of our patients.”

- “The Tories don't offer anything for nothing. They will offer crumbs and remove our rights to strike in the interim of the [strike] mandate ending.”



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