

UK nurses denounce RCN union for suspending strikes to enter talks with government

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Rank-and-file nurses have spoken out against the unilateral decision by Royal College of Nursing (RCN) General Secretary Pat Cullen to suspend a 48-hour strike action planned for next week, from March 1, to enter talks with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative government.

Cullen announced the decision Tuesday without a single concession offered in relation to the imposed NHS pay award for 2022/3 of around 4 percent, with talks starting today.

A joint statement was released by the RCN and the Department of Health and Social Care establishing the framework of the talks. While the news has been sprung on nurses, it was clearly worked out behind their backs after mounting picket lines since last December in the first national strike in the 106-year history of the RCN.

Far from being bound by the mandated restoration pay demand of RPI plus 5 percent, the statement acknowledges the “the Prime Minister's priority to halve inflation” while paying lip service to “a fair and reasonable settlement.” Negotiations over pay are tied to “productivity enhancing reforms”.

The demands for more sacrifice by NHS frontline workers are packaged in language meant to invoke a shared “national interest,” setting a goal of a settlement “that recognises the vital role that nurses and nursing play in the National Health Service” but also “the wider economic pressures facing the United Kingdom.”

This is under conditions in which the government has announced its recommendation of an even worse 3.5 percent uplift for nurses and public sector workers for 2023/4.

At an online meeting Tuesday evening, called by the

RCN, nurses raised their opposition to the sabotage of the union bureaucracy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday cited some of the comments posted during the 45-minute session. Nurses objected to the jettisoning of their pay mandate and raised opposition to a “pay for productivity” formula, as well as to the RCN sitting down with a government intent on stripping nurses of the right to strike through its Strikes Bill legislation.

As one noted, “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.”

Other nurses made the following comments:

“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%?”

“Just sounds like rank and file nurses have been sold down the river.”

“Will this government actually care if the NHS collapses? Privatisation is what they want and it is becoming evident through the excess use [of] Agency nurses. This isn't just about pay (christ, we need more) this is about the future of the NHS.”

“How long will we negotiate for? I worry that this is just a Government prolonging tactic. I don't expect the RCN to roll over at the first offer.”

“Is the government now meeting because the junior doctors are also choosing to strike?”

“Why have we cancelled the strikes when we haven't had any talks yet? They may be stalling or offer something poor. Shouldn't the strikes be cancelled only when we are potentially happy with what they are trying to negotiate?”

“I cannot understand the optimism when we do not yet know what is on offer. I urge you not to capitulate.”

“The strikes should go ahead until the PM has agreed the pay rise. I would be on more money working at KFC but I am a nurse for a reason. KFC workers don’t have huge student debts to pay.”

“How do we prevent falling into the Tory trap of divide and conquer by only accepting a nurse specific pay offer?”

The RCN used the escalation of action for March 1 in England at 128 NHS employers as a bargaining chip, to convince the Sunak government to work with the union bureaucracy to ensure it never happened. Cullen struck a blow against unified action with teachers who are out on that day and junior doctors who are now entering the dispute. On Monday, the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association confirmed one day strike action for March 15 with the British Medical Association announced a mandate for a 72-hour strike next month.

If nurses are not to be frogmarched into a defeat which will be used to set a precedent across the NHS, they must take the dispute out of the hands of the RCN bureaucracy.

Nurses—opposed to the RCN’s divide-and-rule approach and refusal to wage a fight over not just pay but the very existence of the NHS—are in open conflict with a union hierarchy working with a government planning to raid education and healthcare budgets to fund military expenditure for war against Russia in Ukraine.

This is not solely the position of the non-Trades Union Congress affiliated RCN, but that of all the health unions, including the GMB, Unite and the largest, Unison, who have not even formulated a pay demand. They have all counterposed the collaborative approach of the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, pegging pay well below inflation, as a model for the Tories to embrace.

Unison head of health Sara Gorton stated, “Dialogue has led to decent wage offers in Scotland and Wales. Rishi Sunak should take heed and give it a go too.”

In the case of Wales, the 3 percent extra offered by the Labour Assembly involved a 1.5 percent lump sum, which was voted down by two-thirds of ambulance drivers in the GMB and 92 percent in Unite. The RCN also attempted to use this to scupper further action by

suspending strikes in Wales, with the ballot over the deal closing on February 27.

In relation to Scotland, the pay deal for 2022/3 was closed on the basis of another below-inflation deal worth on average 7.5 percent, with Unison and Unite leading the charge to accept. This was used to enforce the settlement on all NHS workers in Scotland.

The Scottish National Party/Green government agreed only to bring forward pay talks for 2023/4 with the RCN, GMB and Royal College of Midwives, whose members rejected the rotten deal. All three unions sat on live strike mandates, claiming they had only been “paused”. But the RCN has now come out openly to recommend the proposed sub-standard offer by the Scottish government worth on average just 6.5 percent, with additional lump sums not consolidated into pay going forward.

The struggle of nurses and all NHS workers is at a critical juncture, posing directly the need for rank-and-file committees to unify their struggles against the divisions enforced from above by the union bureaucracy.

The fight for a cost-of-living increase requires a broader political fight against the de facto alliance of Labour with the Tory government on austerity and war. The fight to defend health care as a social right requires a socialist program to reverse the cuts and further privatisation intended to funnel wealth upwards to the financial and corporate elite.

We urge all nurses and NHS workers to contact NHS FightBack.



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