

UK unions call off National Health Service strikes to enter sell-out negotiations

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Britain's trade union bureaucracy has called off every strike planned this week by National Health Service (NHS) workers. This is part of a concerted effort to end months of strikes throughout the public and private sectors with below inflation pay settlements.

An eight-month strike wave that began last summer has seen industrial action by rail and postal workers, telecoms workers, educators in schools and lecturers and other staff in universities, civil servants, nurses, ambulance paramedics and call handlers.

Strikes are being called off without even a concrete offer from the government. On Friday, the GMB union called off strikes by 13,000 ambulance workers due March 6 and 8. Unison, the largest union in the NHS, called off strikes of 32,000 health workers, including 25,000 ambulance workers, scheduled for March 8.

The only strikes that were set to go ahead among ambulance workers next week involved Unite on March 6. But on Sunday, hours before they were to strike in the West Midlands, North West, South Central, South Coastal, and East Midlands regions, their action was called off. Also cancelled was a March 8 strike by ambulance staff in Yorkshire.

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy representing 64,000 chartered physiotherapists, physiotherapy students and support workers called off its scheduled March 22 stoppage to join the talks.

The union bureaucracy had already sabotaged a 48-hour joint strike March 1-3 that would also have involved hundreds of thousands of nurses at over 100 NHS Trusts in England. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) called off that action last month without receiving a pay offer from the government to start "intensive talks" that will end in a sell-out.

The union bureaucracy made its latest cancellations after the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)

called on the NHS staff council—representing all the health unions—to begin formal pay discussions on the proviso that all upcoming industrial action be called off "with immediate effect".

The health unions claim that the government has shifted from its position that the current 2022-23 pay claim is settled at 4 percent. But all that is on offer is at most a tiny one-off top-up payment. Whatever deal is cooked up, it will still be substantially below inflation.

The GMB claimed as it entered talks, "This is a huge shift from the government." Unison claimed, "The government has finally promised extra investment in pay for both years."

None of this is true. Last month the government recommended a pay deal of just 3.5 percent for nurses in England for 2023-24, starting in April. This will be quickly eaten up by a surge in food, energy and fuel prices.

That workers can expect nothing from the talks is confirmed by the experience of the British Medical Association (BMA). It entered talks with the government after the RCN opened the floodgates. The BMA represents 47,600 junior doctors who recently voted to strike by a majority of 98 percent. The doctors, who start on salaries of between £25,000 and £30,000, have seen a real terms pay cut of more than 26 percent since the global financial crash in 2008.

The union had no option but to sanction a strike, with a 72 hour stoppage named for March 13—the first ever three-day strike by the doctors. But the BMA then entered talks on March 2 without any concessions being offered from the government. BMA junior doctors committee co-chair Dr. Vivek Trivedi said, "This meeting is an opportunity for the Secretary of State to avert these strikes and act to retain junior doctors and protect the future of the NHS and the care

it offers patients.” The BMA was offered nothing by Health Secretary Steve Barclay, with talks failing within hours.

Outside the NHS, on Saturday, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) has called off its next round of rolling strikes due to begin on March 13 and lasting until April 21. It is recommending members agree a below inflation deal to be imposed over 24 months, a 7 percent award backdated to last April, falling to 5 percent this April and dropping again to another 2 percent in January 2024. The EIS held its original strike ballot claiming it was seeking a 10 percent wage increase for the current year.

The third largest ongoing national strike numerically after the nurses’ dispute and that of civil servants in the Public and Commercial Services Union is that of 115,000 Royal Mail workers in the Communication Workers Union (CWU). Since last autumn Royal Mail workers have taken 18 days of industrial action. Workers renewed a six-month strike mandate on February 21, as required by law, by a 96 percent majority.

In response, with Royal Mail demanding a below inflation pay deal, the tearing up of working conditions and 10,000 possible job losses, the bureaucracy scuttled back into talks. The first rotten agreement stemming from the talks emerged last Thursday, with the union accepting ongoing “revisions” of workers’ conditions imposed by management during the dispute.

These have seen workers’ start times changed and their being given longer routes and unbearable workloads, pushing them to work later in the day. Addressing union members last week, CWU leader Dave Ward was met with a hostile response on social media when he said the union had “agreed to deploy the current phase of revisions that are going on across the country by the end of the financial year,” adding, “We do expect our reps everywhere to be able to re-engage in the revisions.” The changes had been agreed “to try and assist the financial situation in the company”, he declared.

NHS workers and millions of others being systemically betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy must turn to an alternative perspective based on class struggle, not collaboration with the government and the employers.

Workers in every sector must demand an end to talks,

the rejection of any sordid deal that comes out of them and the resumption of industrial action until the fight is won. Above all this means that workers seize control of the running of their strikes through the formation of rank-and-file committees, democratically elected, in every workplace.

In its February 9 statement, “Where next for the UK's National Health Service workers? A balance sheet of the strikes so far”, NHS FightBack warned that the struggle of health workers was in imminent danger of sell-out.

It explained that the fight “cannot be won based upon the limited programme of occasional one and two-day strikes aimed at pressuring the government to make concessions on pay. Nor can it be left under the leadership of a union bureaucracy that is consciously seeking to betray this historic fight.”

The government, it continued, was on a war footing abroad with billions of pounds in lethal weapons already sent to the battlefield: “workers must understand that NATO’s de facto and escalating war with Russia excludes any possibility of the ‘compromise’ held out by the trade union bureaucracy.”

An upcoming defence review is set to hand the keys of the Treasury to the Ministry of Defence. The statement read, “War is not compatible with a policy of social reform, nor with the preservation of democratic rights. It demands unprecedented austerity and savage repression. Workers must respond to the grave threats they face by mounting a struggle against capitalism, against war and for socialism.”

NHS workers, contact and join NHS FightBack today!



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