

UK: Support grows for no-confidence vote in Royal College of Nursing officials

Organisers tell WSWs: “Once 1,000 signatures are gathered there will be an Emergency General Meeting and a No Confidence vote, whether the RCN support this or not.”

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Organisers of a petition calling for a no-confidence vote in the leadership of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) over its recommendation of a rotten pay deal with Britain’s Conservative government, are determined to proceed with their fight for an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM).

Members of the EGM Organising Committee replied yesterday to questions from the *World Socialist Web Site*, making clear their resolve to uphold the rights of RCN members. The petition is winning support, in defiance of threats and intimidation from RCN bureaucrats including their warnings that police were called to investigate the petition and its authors.

On Monday, the *Guardian* newspaper carried a prominent article headlined, “Royal College of Nursing asks police to investigate some of its members”. Its second-tier headline announced, “Exclusive: RCN says hundreds of signatures on petition to hold vote of no confidence in leadership are false”.

The *Guardian* cited the RCN’s denunciations (reported by *Nursing Notes* more than one week earlier) of a petition submitted to head office and signed by more than 1,000 members. The petitioners called for an EGM and a no-confidence vote in General Secretary Pat Cullen, her executive team, National Executive Committee (NEC) Council members who endorsed the deal, and the union’s pay dispute negotiating committee.

RCN members were exercising their democratic rights under RCN Standing Orders which empower members to call an EGM for a specified purpose if they have the support of 1,000 members.

Within hours, the RCN leadership launched a crackdown, telling *Nursing Notes* that the petition was a “grotesque act” and warning, “We will be taking legal advice, involving the police, the regulator and carrying out a forensic examination.”

Signatories have since been contacted by cybersecurity firm Dionach, at the instigation of the RCN, alleging that “serious

concerns have come to light including a potential breach of data protection legislation” and suggesting that RCN members had their personal information added to the petition “without giving their consent”.

The RCN’s claims—made without a shred of evidence—are prima facie absurd. As petition organisers told *Nursing Notes* on Tuesday, “The Petition requires a correct membership name, email address and membership number. If those membership numbers and other details are correct, then such data must have come from somewhere inside the RCN.” They added, “Members do not have access to the RCN Membership Database, only RCN staff do.”

On Wednesday night members of the EGM Organising Committee remained defiant. Despite RCN officials arrogantly declaring that the second petition “will be considered invalid”, the Organising Committee told WSWs, “Once 1,000 signatures are gathered there will be an Emergency General Meeting and a No Confidence vote whether the RCN support this or not”.

The committee’s determined stand reflects an insurgent movement among nurses to defeat the RCN’s collusion with the government and win a genuine above-inflation pay award and improved conditions amid the gravest crisis in the history of the National Health Service (NHS).

Support for the petition is growing. A spokesperson from NHS FightBack who works as a nurse in South East England told WSWs, “We support the courageous stance of the EGM Organising Committee, and we will campaign to support this crucial initiative.”

He continued, “A movement is snowballing among nurses to reject the RCN’s rotten deal, and nurses have huge public support. The critical issue is building rank-and-file leadership and organisation at every hospital to take forward this fight. I urge colleagues to sign the petition and read the statement by NHS FightBack.”

Below, we reproduce the written replies from members of the

EGM Organising Committee to questions submitted by WSWs.

RCN members can sign the petition here.

WSWS: The RCN leadership claims that hundreds of names on the original petition were falsified and a deceased person's name used. What is your response?

EGM Organising Committee: None of the petitioners (the original ones or ourselves) have any control over the information put on the petition. We operate in good faith that this is genuine information from individuals and we have validated the signatures on our second petition and no-one has replied to say that the information is false or that this is not a genuine signature.

We are aware that the RCN has commissioned an external investigation into the first petition but we have no knowledge of that investigation or any findings. Anyone who deliberately put false information on any petition would know that this would be discovered during the validation process so we believe that if false names were put on the original petition, then this was done to deliberately sabotage and undermine it.

WSWS: The RCN leadership called in the police to investigate the petition and its authors — what do you think of this? And were any of the petition organisers contacted by police?

EGM Organising Committee: The RCN appears to be backtracking on its claim that they called the police in. They claimed to the press that they had called the police in only hours after the original first petition was submitted. This seemed very odd as it usually takes a week to validate petition signatures based on previous EGM petitions. This suggests that they knew that the information was false before contacting any members to verify this. The RCN now appear to be saying that they haven't called the police in yet but that they might do this in the future. We have never been contacted by the police and we don't believe that any member has been contacted by the police. The threat of police action seems designed to frighten and intimidate members from calling for a vote of no confidence in the RCN Leadership.

WSWS: Was the initial petition taken down by the RCN or had it already been ended because you met the required number of signatures?

EGM Organising Committee: We did not take the original petition down and we believe that the original petition had exceeded 1,000 signatures which were required. We do not know what the RCN is doing with this petition and it presumably contains many hundreds of genuine verified signatures [calling] for an EGM that the RCN is simply ignoring.

WSWS: IT company Dionach has contacted signatories suggesting the original petition breached General Data Protection Regulation. What is your response to this?

EGM Organising Committee: We have not been contacted by Dionach. We believe that the original petitioners (like all petitioners) acted in good faith and they (like us) have no control over information out on the petition. If there was a GDPR breach then this would be a breach by the RCN and we have always maintained that members do not have access to the RCN membership database. Any GDPR breach would have nothing to do with the petitioners. All of this data is controlled by RCN staff and it is not clear whether or not Dionach is independently investigating RCN staff or if they are simply being commissioned by RCN staff to only investigate members.

WSWS: Have signatories and other RCN members been intimidated by the tactics employed by the RCN leadership? Is the revised petition winning support?

EGM Organising Committee: The petition is receiving growing support. We know that a number of RCN members have said that they feel intimidated and scared of the RCN Leadership targeting them and are worried that the RCN Leadership might refer them to the police and the NMC [Nursing and Midwifery Council]. This seems like bullying and intimidation tactics designed to protect the RCN Leadership.

WSWS: What is the feeling among nurses toward the RCN's (and other health unions') pay deal with the Tory government? What do you think the voting outcome will be?

EGM Organising Committee: It appears that most RCN members strongly oppose the pay deal on offer and the result of the vote should be known in a few weeks. We expect a resounding vote against, based on what we are hearing from members.

WSWS: Have you considered what your next steps will be if the RCN leadership blocks your second petition?

EGM Organising Committee: The RCN Rules written over 100 years ago predicted that one day the RCN General Secretary and Council might try and ignore an EGM petition signed by members. They created clauses in the RCN rules for exactly this event. In those circumstances the rules allow us to convene our own General Meeting with the full power of the RCN rules and the law. So once 1,000 signatures are gathered there will be an Emergency General Meeting and a No Confidence vote whether the RCN support this or not.

WSWS: What did you think of the statement by NHS FightBack in defence of the petition and its call for rank-and-file committees to organise a counteroffensive against the RCN bureaucracy and its collusion with the Tory government?

EGM Organising Committee: We appreciate the public support given by NHS FightBack in our legitimate call to hold the current RCN leadership to account.



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