

UK: Nurses speak from the picket lines during strike over pay

“The new anti-strike laws display the government’s contempt for people wanting what’s rightfully theirs.”

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to nurses on the picket lines during their strike across England on May 1. Nurses and other National Health Service (NHS) staff are fighting a well below inflation government pay award.

Cambridge

At Addenbrookes hospital in Cambridge, **Kat** was with colleague Gerry. She said, “We’re both working A&E, and the conditions are terrible. The staffing levels are poor. The patient care given, to the best of everyone’s ability, is just appalling because we’re so stretched and working in such terrible conditions. We’re doing what we can, but it’s just not enough. We need more support. We need staff retention, as all our senior A&E nurses keep leaving, which then leads juniors to try and do a job that they’re just not fully equipped for yet.

“There hasn’t been any progress, to be honest. We’re not actually being listened to. We don’t just want a bit of extra cash each month. We want better working conditions. For our patients.

“I thought the agreement was rubbish. It’s like an extra £40 a month. That isn’t going to do anything for anyone. It’s not going to encourage people to come into the profession and that’s what we need. We need staff to stay with us and they’re not, we’re hemorrhaging them.”

Healthcare assistant **Jenny** said, “Nursing and nursing staff over the past 10 years have had a considerable pay cut. We also have 13 to 17 percent less staff joining to be a student nurse. So 20 percent of nurses report that they have kidney infections from not being able to just go to the bathroom on shift. Shift work takes years off your life. We’re doing that for a wage that isn’t a living wage. It’s just leaving the NHS on its knees.

“Sickness rates for mental health went up by about 30 percent after COVID. Claps don’t pay your bills. They clapped us, but they refused to back us. They called us heroes, but where is that now?

“The anti-strike bill is not at all democratic or supporting people’s human rights, but hopefully that’s not going to happen. I’m really hopeful that people will stand against it. Everyone has similar struggles and I completely support anyone that’s going on strike.”

Leeds

Graham is a health care assistant on intensive care at Leeds General Infirmary (LGI). He said, “It is disgusting how the Tory government is treating us. They are getting good pay, second houses and whatever. Nurses deserve more pay. All the government is concerned about is going private. We all should be getting together. We are being treated badly. The French all stick together but we are all separated.”

Will, a nurse said, “I think there will be a new vote to strike again, even though the union have accepted it. It seems like members in the RCN are not happy with it. After all the sacrifices we had made, we couldn’t vote

to support the leadership’s backing of the deal.

“Nursing is being decimated through wage cuts and the withdrawal of the training bursary. I don’t think I would have been able to get into nursing if I had not got a bursary. It is a dilemma in regard to giving emergency cover. We want to look after the patients, but NHS has been underfunded for ages.”

Maxine a nurse at LGI said, “For me I don’t understand why this deal was promoted by the union.”

Naj, a nurse at St James’ Hospital, in Leeds said, “We have Unite, Unison, GMB and RCN – why? We need to speak with one voice. If we are all fighting for one because there is no reason for this division. And the unions should not be money-making machines. They are our voice and if they are not for us, what are they?

“We are here and we are trying to get our voice out there, but where are the unions and the union bosses? The teachers are on strike, the railway workers, the nurses – we are all public service workers. If we stop, the whole economy will stop and the system will definitely crash.”

Sheffield

Anne, a nurse at Sheffield Children’s Hospital, said, “I’m coming to the end of my career and I want to make sure that people coming up through the ranks enjoy working in the NHS like I did. We also need to make sure that it’s safe. This is about pay, but it’s also about safe staffing. It’s making sure that the nurses of the future are able to give the care that is needed to their patients. To give the best that they can within the restraints that we’ve got.

“So, I’m here today for the future of the NHS and the new people coming into it.”

Sue, a senior nurse at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, said, “The workload expectations for nurses are increasing year-on-year. The availability of training and development and the funding to support that isn’t there. Nurses are fighting to get through each day.

“Those leaving at the highest rate are those who’ve only been qualified for two years. They’ve gone through their training and have entered the profession hoping to do their best. The existing staff don’t have the energy and resources to support those new nurses and encourage them to stay. Without them, what hope have we got for the future?

“They’ve been through the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, entering the health system at the worst possible time. The NHS that we’ve known, as senior nurses, has never felt so unsafe. That’s one reason why we’re on the picket line. It’s not just about pay, but primarily about safety, along with recruitment, training, and retention, etc.

“There aren’t enough resources and staff to ensure safe ward conditions. We are trying to protect the future of the NHS.”

“We’re not sure that the RCN has managed the dispute well. The date they chose for the strikes was near to the end of the cut-off period of the strike mandate. It’s ill thought out, rushed, and a bit of a mistake. We RCN members rejected the pay rise, so they had to organise strike action within this mandate. That the government took us to court is another reason we’re on the picket line, because it’s become a fight with the Tories.

“We saved lives during the pandemic, so now it’s like a kick in the teeth that they’re taking us to court to stop us striking. It feels like, because the RCN has organised limited strike days, we’ve not had as much impact as we’d have liked.”

James, a student nurse at Sheffield Children’s Hospital said, “This strike is about making sure that my future is safe and a career that I want to stay in and I don’t burn out eventually. Talking to my more experienced colleagues, I realised the general strain that nurses and support staff are put under. They’re forced to deal with unrealistic expectations.

“Now is the time that we’ve all stood up and said, ‘It’s not okay.’ Conditions in the health system should be getting better. It’s not just about pay, it’s about conditions as well.

“The government showed their hand by taking the RCN to the High Court to cut short the strike days. They claim they’re trying to make hospital conditions safe—but that’s what we’re striking for.

“The new anti-strike laws display the government’s contempt for people wanting what’s rightfully theirs. This is not nurses being greedy. We’re a peaceful protest and they’re trying to shut it down. We’re not aggressive or causing harm. We’re opposing the harm that will be done to us if things carry on. It’s part-and-parcel of stripping back democratic freedoms and rights that benefit the people over the powerful.”

Sam, a teacher, was supporting the picket line at Sheffield Children’s Hospital. He said, “I’m supporting the nurses because in society it’s the people who are on the front line, such as nurses, teachers, and doctors, who are given the rawest deal. Prices of everything are going up.

“We’re in the same boat. Under successive governments, we’ve seen the services decimated and stripped back to the core. If we don’t stand up now, it’s not only the workers that suffer but children and patients. Everyone suffers.

“My partner is a trainee nurse, at the start of his career. Entering that profession is becoming unsustainable for people. It’s a hard, emotionally-draining job. Nurses burn out, like they do in teaching. When you work in the front-line you can only sustain it for so long if you’re not supported in terms of service funding, pay, and conditions.

“It’s important for these different struggles to be united because they’re all linked. They’re all rooted in the government stripping back services to the point where they’re going to fail.”

Isabelle, a hematology nurse at Royal Hallamshire Hospital said, “A lot of people focus on nurses’ pay, but it’s also about safe staffing levels and the interests of patients. Many of us see the very poor conditions on the wards, such as the bed shortage and patients not being seen fast enough. Some wards have it a lot worse than others. Unfortunately, this bad situation is becoming the norm.

“I think that the struggles of junior doctors and nurses should be joined together. There are many other roles in the health system such as porters and domestic carers that need to be paid more.”

Barnsley

At Barnsley General Hospital emergency department nurse **Shirley** said, “We’re here today to represent all the nurses in the Trust who are working tirelessly in understaffed wards, with very limited resources, trying their very best to give the best care to their patients. Patient care is compromised.

“We’re sick of coming on shift and not being able to deliver the care to the standard we want.

“There is a problem in recruiting and retaining nurses because the wage they get is not one they can live on. Nurses are having to do extra shifts in order to cover their basic living costs.

“We can’t go on like this. We’re losing our experienced nurses who are not there to mentor the new ones. So as new people complete their training and come though, not only are they struggling to pay off student debts on a small wage, but they’ve not got that experience or support from more senior staff.

“There is a power in the majority, and I think that the nursing workforce as a whole need to unite and stand together. It’s a shame how the workforce has been divided by the different unions and we’re not standing together.”

Nicola, a neonatal nurse, said, “I’m struggling pay wise. I’ve got two children. Luckily my husband is a teacher, and he gets a lot better pay than I do but I’m struggling personally.

“The government taking legal action is disgusting. We should be allowed to have our full strike days. Everybody should be allowed to strike. Why make it illegal for people to strike? Can they not see why people are striking? The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer.

“They were applauding us during the COVID pandemic and now they’ve forgotten about us. They want to privatise us like in America. Nurses and doctors need to go on strike together to put a united front out.”

Jean, a retired nurse supporting strikers at Barnsley Hospital, said, “I had the best years in the NHS. Now it’s just being trodden into the ground, by this government and one of the main objectives is to close it down. I just don’t think people realise how bad that’s going to be for their children, their grandchildren in the future when they can’t get healthcare.

“The Tories promised 40 new hospitals. They haven’t built any. They haven’t extended any. They’re not keeping hospitals they’ve got, in a good condition. You can’t get operations done because there’s not enough theatre space. And if there is any space, the consultants have to march round all morning looking to see if there’s a bed for intensive care, before they can go in to operate.

“Staff are not paid enough to live. A lot of them are off sick and a lot of them have Long COVID. [Health Secretary Steven] Barclay the bully is going to impose this disgusting pay award on nurses, which they don’t want. I just hope that they can be strong enough with support to carry on this action.

“The best thing nurses could do for their cause would be to match their strike with junior doctors. The best thing that the country could have would be something like a one-to-two week general strike.”

Manchester

Janice has worked as a nurse for 14 years, including seven at The Christie cancer hospital. She said, “Five years ago, we had five patients per nurse. The NHS since then has lost 40 percent of staff overall. The research funding has stopped. They’re relying on agency staff, and that is filling the pockets of people that run the country.

“What makes me cross is that the agencies are taking nurses from the NHS and selling them back. I’d like to know how much investment the Tories have in agencies.”

Singer/songwriter **Claire Mooney** is a cancer patient undergoing treatment at The Christie. “In 2020, I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During the pandemic these people cared for me, they risked their lives. I see how hard they work; they are run ragged, but their care and compassion is second to none. They deserve decent pay. I support them wholeheartedly.

“The government has money. A below inflation pay deal is an insult, and it wouldn’t cause inflation because they wouldn’t put it in offshore accounts like the greedy and the selfish. They deserve a decent rate of pay, they deserve not to be struggling. They deserve not to go to food banks.

“We were promised when we were Brexiting [leaving the European

Union] there would be £350 million a week to spend on the NHS. There is money, there's money in the coffers. In fact, there'd be more if ministers paid taxes and they didn't hide it away. There is money, but they don't choose to spend it in the right areas.”

Poole

Dani, a pediatric nurse at Poole General Hospital with 30 years' experience said, “I voted to reject the RNC recommended pay offer. There wasn't anything they've given us. I think a lot of people were desperate and accepted it, but after discussion with colleagues, they realized what was being offered to us is a pay cut. The government don't care about us. They've wanted to privatize the NHS since forever.”



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