

UK nurses' strike in danger: union leader claims action has "hit the end of the road"

Richard Tyler
22 June 2023

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union is preparing to scrap the nurses' strike, effectively enforcing the government's insulting pay offer courageously voted down by its members in April.

Following that rejection, the RCN prevaricated for a month before finally organising a national ballot for renewed strike action, running May 23-June 23.

On Monday this week, RCN leader Pat Cullen told the *Guardian*, "There are only a couple of days left to vote by post and it is starting to look like the government's rules on postal voting could get the better of us." Government legislation requires such ballots be conducted by post. For a strike to be authorised under Tory anti-union legislation, at least 50 percent of eligible voters must cast a ballot—whatever the balance of "for" and "against".

Cullen continued, "Nursing staff can still post their ballots back but unless 150,000 people get their votes sent back in the post then the strike has hit the end of the road."

This is deliberate sabotage. Cullen is following standard practice for union bureaucrats in using government anti-strike legislation as a weapon against her own members. She makes no mention of any concerted campaign, besides visiting a few hospitals, to turn out the vote, or of plans for a rebalot if it fails. The laws requiring a re-ballot every six months have long been accepted by the unions, without a whimper. Neither will the latest battery of anti-strike laws, currently being legislated via the Strikes (Minimum Services Levels) Bill, be fought by the unions. Cullen's defeatist language is designed to produce the result it predicts.

The truth is that the RCN leadership only wants an excuse to justify bringing the strike to an end.

From December last year, nurses mounted six days of

determined strike action, intent on reversing over a decade of real-terms pay cuts which have seen them lose up to 20 percent of their income and caused a crippling staff recruitment and retention crisis in the NHS. Their last 28-hour strike impacted around half of England's hospitals, mental health and community services at the end of April.

But the RCN bureaucracy was on the other side of the barricades from the start. The staggering loss of pay and staff is the result of the health unions' refusal to mount a single effective struggle to defend health service workers, facilitating the government's austerity drive.

Forced by the mood in the working class to take action for the first time in the union's history last year, and to make a 19 percent pay rise demand, the RCN began the dispute in full retreat. Only limited strikes were called, and largely kept separate from other sections of striking healthcare workers in different unions. The 19 percent pay demand was publicly lowered to "around 10 percent".

In February, a national strike was called off by the RCN after the union said it would consider *any pay offer* made by the government. Cullen and the other health unions, who also called off action, entered talks with the government which eventually produced the government's sub-inflation offer. The RCN recommended the government's rotten deal to nurses—with Cullen even saying it would "make a positive impact on the nursing profession"—and put enormous pressure on its members to accept, including launching an investigation and calling the police against those who tried to organise a vote of no confidence.

Shocked by the rejection, the RCN apparatus had no intention of acting on its members' wishes. As NHS

FightBack warned at the time: “Left in the hands of the RCN bureaucracy... nurses face a campaign of attrition by the union apparatus aimed at forcing capitulation.”

If the turnout in the current ballot fails to reach the legal threshold, it will not be down to any lack of will to fight among nurses, but a massive vote of no confidence in Cullen and the bureaucracy she heads. Nurses will have been convinced the RCN has no intention of waging a fight in their interests and are not willing to sacrifice more pay lost on strike days, or the care of their patients for the pretence.

An important supporting role has been played in the RCN’s betrayal by the Unison and GMB unions, who successfully foisted the government’s deal on their hundreds of thousands of healthcare worker members earlier this year. If the RCN now succeeds in scuppering the nurses’ strike, this will leave members of the British Medical Association and Unite out on their own, preparing the way for more sellouts.

These experiences point decisively to the need for new organisations of struggle which can take the fight to defend the NHS and its workers out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Throughout the dispute, NHS FightBack has explained the essential political issues involved, defend nurses from the attacks of the RCN leadership and chart a way forward for all healthcare workers. It wrote in February that NHS workers rail workers, postal workers, educators, civil servants and others “face a government intent on funnelling social wealth to the major corporations and the super-rich, while the working class is made to pay for the pandemic bailout, the escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and the economic crisis produced by rising oil, gas and food prices.”

Organising a counter-offensive, the article went on, “demands a political and organisational struggle against a trade union bureaucracy sabotaging every one of these struggles, and a Labour Party colluding with the Tories in their attacks.”

Within hours of the RCN, Unison and the GMB announcing their sellout deal with the government, NHS FightBack proposed a plan of action to defeat the betrayal: “Vote ‘No’ and speak out against the sellout!”, “Resume and extend the strike”, “Remove the union leaderships!”, “Form rank-and-file committees!”.

The statement explained, “This must be the beginning and not the end of a struggle to transfer power out of the hands of the union bureaucracy to the rank-and-file.” This remains the fundamental task confronting healthcare, and all, workers. Cullen, with an annual salary of almost £200,000 and no idea of desperate struggles facing nurses daily, and the rest of the RCN leadership cannot be allowed to deal another blow to the NHS strikes; it is up to the membership to take them forward on their own terms and under their own organisations.

NHS FightBack, the Socialist Equality Party, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will provide every assistance in this battle. Contact us today and link up with likeminded workers!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)