Northern Ireland health workers' disputes need united rank-and-file leadership

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Doctors, nurses, health and social care workers in Northern Ireland are involved in mounting disputes with health service employers, the power-sharing executive at Stormont and the Labour government in Westminster.

On November 20, resident doctors, including on call and locum doctors, held a 24 hour stoppage called by the British Medical Association Northern Ireland (BMA NI).

Dr. Steven Montgomery, chair of the BMA NI's resident doctors committee, told the media that resident doctors have lost 20 percent of their pay relative to other professions since 2018 and are seeking pay restoration.

Starting salary for a resident doctor, after years of intense training, is currently £35,704, substantially less than colleagues in Scotland (£37,316) and England (£41,226).

On Monday, consultants and specialist doctors, also BMA NI members, followed with a 24-hour strike providing only Christmas Day levels of cover.

Both strikes followed ballots in which 92 percent of resident doctors and 79 percent of consultants who voted backed strike action after rejecting a 3.5 percent, sub inflation, pay deal. This was the second round of 24-hour strikes this year—.on June 25, when consultants and specialty, associate specialist and specialist doctors took part in their first ever strike in Northern Ireland and then by resident doctors on June 29.

Northern Ireland Health Minister Robbie Butler of the Ulster Unionist Party has refused any increase beyond 3.5 percent, warning that anything on top would have "significant repercussions for nurses, teachers, police officers and indeed the entire public sector workforce."

The BMA sanctioned the latest token one-day strikes to allow members to let off some steam. Opposed to waging a single unified struggle of resident doctors against pay erosion, the BMA has for year pursued entirely separate campaigns in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, each negotiated with its own government.

In Wales, the BMA suspended strikes by junior doctors, consultants and specialists in April 2024 to enter talks with the Labour-run Welsh government, and two months later recommended a 12.4 percent deal well short of pay restoration. In Scotland, the BMA called off strikes twice, in July 2023 and again this January, only days before a four-day stoppage was due to begin, to seal deals with the Scottish National Party government. Doctors in Scotland have yet to take a single day of strike action since their colleagues in England first walked out against the then Conservative government in 2016.

In June, the BMA Resident Doctors Committee (RDC) vetoed a four-day strike as they secured a sellout deal with the Starmer government, which scraped through by a narrow margin of 53 percent off a turnout of 57 percent. It produced a headline increase of just 6.6 percent by April 2027.

The result is a deliberate fragmentation of the workforce, with pay erosion standing at 16 percent in Wales, 20.8 percent in Northern Ireland and 21 percent in England.

Even as doctors in Northern Ireland walked out, the BMA in England called off a strike by consultants that would have coincided with the stoppage. On November 10, the BMA consultants committee "paused" a 48-hour stoppage due to begin on November 25, after Labour Health Secretary Yvette Cooper agreed to negotiations.

The NHS is a UK-wide service employing 1.4 million people. Its survival depends on a unified struggle against pay erosion, understaffing and privatisation. The BMA's policy of divide and rule along national lines only serves the interests of the employers.

The Burnham government is preparing the next round of real-terms pay cuts. In evidence submitted in October to the NHS Pay Review Body and the doctors' pay review body, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) said it planned a pay rise of just 2.4 percent for NHS staff in England in 2027/28, including doctors. Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation rose to 3.6 percent in October, up from 3.5 percent in September. As pay review body recommendations set the benchmark for health workers in Northern Ireland and Wales, the 2.4 percent figure is a pay cut aimed far beyond England.

The union bureaucracy in the other health sector unions

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follow the same divisive course. On November 20, as resident doctors walked out, Northern Ireland nurses, members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), concluded their own strike ballot. There are nearly 29,000 registered nurses in Northern Ireland, including many RCN members. Pay for nurses in Northern Ireland on Agenda for Change contracts is covered by the NHS Pay Review Body, which recommended a 3.3 percent uplift for 2026/27.

This miserable annual increment was paid to nurses in England, Scotland and Wales. But nurses in Northern Ireland have not received a penny of their sub inflation award because Northern Ireland Executive ministers at Stormont have been unable to agree a budget with the British government.

The RCN has turned the strike ballot into a means of pressuring the executive to pay the miserable offer already agreed. But it is the RCN leadership that has allowed wages to be delayed year after year, finally being forced into a strike ballot it clearly does not want.

The Northern Ireland Public Services Alliance (NIPSA) announced November 20 the results of its Health and Social Care sectoral ballot for thousands of workers, also covered by the NHS Agenda for Change. The ballot recorded 94 percent in support of a strike. Around 10,000 health workers are NIPSA members. Workers in the sector are also owed the annual 3.3 percent. Nor have the poorest paid received the increases due to raise them to the £13.45 Living Wage.

Unison, which organises around 25,000 workers in the sector, belatedly opened an industrial action ballot on November 10, with results due December 1.

Unite the Union is pursuing a ballot of around 4,000 members between November 23 and December 14. Unite organises paramedics, pathology services, health visitors and community practitioners across the five regional Health & Social Care Trust regions and the NI Ambulance service.

The Northern Ireland Executive in Stormont receives an annual block grant which in 2025/26 totalled £18.8 billion, accounting for 93 percent of the executive's total funding. Health spending is by far the largest single item, accounting for £8.8 billion. Northern Ireland ministers are demanding more funding from Westminster, pointing to the larger public sector workforce in comparison with other UK regions.

The Labour government in Westminster is offering additional funding of £1.5 billion, around 8 percent over three years. This is less than the pay awards already agreed and below inflation. The Burnham government also demands that the executive raises more money in taxes locally to offset centrally imposed cuts.

Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and Alliance are at odds over the sectarian carve-up of resources, and relations have been further inflamed by the dispute over the banned Garvaghy Road Orange march. The crisis over pay is exacerbated by the fact that that the executive may not survive until the Assembly elections due next May. If it collapses or no budget is agreed, Westminster may restrict spending to 95 percent of current levels.

The standoff, hitting health workers, patients and services users alike, poses the urgent need for independent rank-and-file initiative to unify struggles across sectoral and trade union boundaries. NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, calls on doctors, nurses, paramedics, social care staff and all health workers in Northern Ireland to build rank-and-file committees in every hospital, ambulance station and care home, independent of the union bureaucracies. These committees must link the disputes of every section of health workers and unite them with their colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales.

This applies across Ireland, where public sector workers in the Republic recently struck over pay, and throughout Britain where the Burnham government is continuing austerity to fund the imperialist wars in which Britain is up to its neck.

NHS FightBack is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge health workers who agree with this perspective to contact NHS FightBack today and help build it in every hospital and workplace.

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