

UK health workers strike: “We should all be out together”

By our reporters
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to National Health Service (NHS) workers on picket lines in several UK towns and cities during Monday’s four-hour pay dispute strike.

As the strike took place, the government’s position hardened, with NHS Secretary Jeremy Hunt stating that up to 15,000 nurses would be laid off, including 4,000 this year, if the government had to increase health workers’ pay by even one percent. His statement came after the Conservative-led coalition blocked a recommended below-inflation pay “rise”, and just one month after the parliamentary expenses body said MPs should receive a 10 percent increase in their salaries.

Martin works as an electrician at Leeds General Infirmary (LGI). He was critical at the token character of the action. “Four hours on strike, [management] will not miss us. We will have to make up what we have missed when we go back in. One percent to me is just £20 a month, not worth the effort. I want a proper rise. When we come into the NHS we start on a low wage and get the increments each year but that only bring us up to what those outside earn. We only have the increments because we start on such a low rate.

“We had been paid a recruitment and retention increment of £3,500 but when work got tight outside, three years ago, they took that off us. We all lost £70 a week, which we are not going to make up. The government have given themselves 11 percent.”

Martin said, “We all need to live. Prices in the shops are going up each week. Most people are living on what they earn. They are not able to put anything in the bank. There is no prospect for going on holiday or paying for the kids to go to university”.

Susan is an experienced midwife at LGI. More than 80 percent of midwives voted in favour of industrial action, with Susan stating that it was “unprecedented in our 133 year history”, demonstrating the level of anger.

She said, “NHS procurement staff are now looking to other providers for midwifery services. There is a private company called One to One Midwifery that is now providing midwifery services and is being paid by the NHS. In my view, this is the beginning of privatisation in midwifery.”

Susan described how unpaid productivity increases in the

NHS are now the norm. “We work very hard. We work beyond our contractual hours to keep the service going without any extra pay. We do it out of good will. But now we have got to the thin end of the wedge because we are being ignored and we are only asking for one percent this year, a reasonable pay rise next year and maintenance of our pay terms and conditions that have been eroded by the government.”

Alison works at the children’s ward at Barnsley General Hospital as an assistant nurse. She said, “We have not had a pay rise since 2009. We have put up with it and put up with it, we think we are worth more.”

Alison said she was in a pay band of £17,000 to £19,000 a year, having worked for the NHS for nearly 20 years. She said that due to pay cuts over the last years, “I have lost £500 to £600 each year, so over the years about £2,500 to £3,000. That’s a lot of money. Even now if we get a pay rise, it will not make up for the years we have lost”.

Asked if she thought there should be a fightback involving all health workers, she said, “Definitely, I remember the [1984-85] miners’ strike. I was part of that, and everybody should have come out then and backed the miners. People should do the same with the nurses. Everybody out! Everybody out! Stand our ground.”

Sarah is employed by Care UK in Doncaster. She is currently on strike against her employer after they took over services to people with learning disabilities from the NHS in the Doncaster area. Sarah said, “I have come to show support to the NHS workers who are on strike because they need a pay rise”.

She explained, “We were employed by the NHS but then we got TUPED (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment] Regulations) over and we have seen terms and conditions lost, earnings lost. We are fighting for a pay rise now to try and get something back. If I was still with the NHS, I would be here out on strike today fighting for a pay rise. This should be a total strike. We should all be out together”.

At one of the Manchester Royal Infirmary (MRI) picket lines, **Donna**, who has worked in the intensive care unit for 13 years, said, “I’m striking for fair pay but we get nothing. This is the first time ever the midwives are out which is good. I’m also worried about the Ebola crisis. The governments must have

known about it a few years ago but nothing's been auctioned. They are doing test cases here to see how to contain this disease. It may even be airborne."

Alan, a cleaner at MRI, was on strike and said, "Capitalism only works for the few, and when it all goes pear-shaped the working man has to pay."

Stephanie who has worked in the NHS at MRI for 10 years, said, "the cost of living is rising. Everything is rising bar our wages." Asked what she thought the strike would achieve, she said, "Strike action needs to be extended. Strike action needs to come from everybody".

Adele is a lab worker in Manchester who has worked in the NHS for 17 years. She said it was noticeable that since she began working for the NHS, "its values are now changing and I hate to see the change. Patients must be the priority". She said it was "a fair strike and is in tune with public opinion. However the three days spread of strikes will have less impact. If we all came out at the same time, it would have a bigger impact."

Alistair is a radiographer in Manchester at the MRI and said, "A lot of younger workers like myself hadn't been on strike before and this might lead to a bigger strike. My wage is OK, but I'm on strike for those workers in Band 3, such as the cleaners who haven't had a pay rise in three or four years. All workers should stand together against the cuts and privatisation and everything should be re-nationalised."

Sandra, who has worked in the MRI Medical Engineering Department for more than 15 years, said, "I read that the top earners get 185 times more than the lower paid". She also expressed concern about the growing Ebola crisis. Referring to the situation in Africa, she commented, "When it was just the poor black people getting it, governments weren't bothered."

Her friend **Julie** who works at the nearby Manchester Royal Eye Hospital said, "We've not had a pay rise since 2010. The one percent on offer is more like a bonus. It would only be for a year and it wouldn't be incorporated into our wages, so it wouldn't boost our pension. The gap in pay gets wider." Describing how workers are being asked to continually increase their productivity, she said, "I feel battered at the end of the day, I don't even get a lunch break".

Jenny has worked in the NHS for more than 30 years and is a midwife at the maternity unit in Poole Hospital. She said, "We were promised one percent pay rise for everyone, and the Pay Review Body recommended it was fair. Yet the government has gone back on their word and are denying it for more than half of the staff. The PRB said that this meagre rise was affordable, but MPs have managed to give themselves a 10 percent pay rise while denying ours. We are short of staff and there should be a fair pay to retain staff."

Jenny pointed out that since 2010, "midwives and the other staff have lost more than £4,000 pounds in real terms as a result of pay freezes, increases in pension contributions and cost of living increases."

"I am very sorry about what the public are facing as result of

the wider attacks on the NHS by this government. It has a knock-on effect on the patients' services. We are very short of staff. We do many hours of goodwill and most of us do extra hours in the bank [staff resource pool]. We do 12-13 hour shifts night and day even without proper breaks sometimes. It is very stressful."

Steven, a porter at Royal Bournemouth Hospital, said, "We haven't had a pay rise since 2008 to keep up with the inflation. Utility bills, food bills and every other bill have increased. If the government stop tax evasion by the wealthy they could afford to give us decent wage. I heard the average wage in the UK is £26,000 a year but we are not anywhere near it."

"It's very hard to keep up with the cost of living. I do not use my car that much and we tend not to put the heating on much even during the winter. We cut back on our food and shop in supermarkets that sell cheap stuff. It is very hard not to fall into a spiral of debt. Having a holiday to get rid of the stress of this job is difficult nowadays. You have to save for a long time. We don't go on holidays abroad.

"Jeremy Hunt is saying that they have to cut jobs if there is a pay rise. You cannot cut any more jobs. We are already short of staff. We are short in my department, nurses are short of staff."

Sylvia, a nurse of 29 years, works at the Bournemouth Hospital. She said, "I just can't give the care that I want to give to my patients. The workload is too great. I find it very unsatisfying and feel very sad about the situation".

Commenting on the government's claim that waiting targets, staff levels and overall care have improved, Ruth said, "when you work in wards you don't feel it is true. I feel like things have got worse".

"They have recruited overseas nurses recently. But when they are present, they are not assessed to do the job and they can't work to their full capacity, although they are very skilful. Some are not allowed to give drugs and to do certain nursing procedures as nobody has assessed them. They get demoralised too."

Asked what she thought about Jeremy Hunt's ultimatum, she said, "His claims are irrelevant. We need a fair wage for the work we do. Everything we buy has gone up."

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