

UK nurses vote to remove Royal College of Nursing leadership after pay deal sellout

By Ajanta Silva
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Members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) passed a historic no-confidence resolution against the union's leadership by a huge majority of those voting last week. The resolution received 11,156 (78.1 percent) votes in favour, 3,124 (21.9 percent) against, with 1,112 members abstaining.

The resolution presented by Danielle Tiplady, a nurse and Labour Party activist from London, called on the RCN's leadership Council "to stand down." The vote was announced last Friday at an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) in Birmingham, which the RCN was forced to convene after more than 1,000 members signed a petition demanding it—as the implications of a sellout pay deal agreed in March became clear.

The low standing of the RCN bureaucracy was also manifest in the very low ballot turnout. Only 3.47 percent of the 435,000 members voted, with the vast majority of rank-and-file members disengaged from the union and viewing its leadership with contempt.

In a failed attempt to head off a growing rebellion, the RCN's chief executive and general secretary, Janet Davies, stepped down in August and the Council set up "an independent external review into the processes and communication of the 2018 Pay Deal." This is a ruse, as the leadership insisted that the pay deal would not be revisited.

In March, 13 trade unions out of 14 agreed to a derisory rise of 6.5 percent over three years, after health workers suffered a 14 percent pay cut over the last eight years under the austerity measures of Tory-led governments. The Retail Price Index inflation for the next three years is estimated at 9.6 percent, meaning the deal is in fact a cut in real wages.

The de-facto pay cut was sold "as the best deal in eight years" by the unions. But when workers checked their pay packets, they discovered pay rises as low as

12 pence. Many received a meagre increase of 1.5 percent, not even the 3 percent promised, with the rest of the first year increase delayed until after the annual incremental date.

At the EGM, the RCN Council was challenged by members who queued up to demand their removal. Geoff from Scotland said, "We were told that we were going to be listened to. ... I have been raising issues...and this council has been organising against people like me who speak. We have been told that we were a 'certain type of people.'... I have been told that I was Momentum. I don't even belong to the Labour Party."

He denounced the RCN leadership for sending Scottish members an e-mail portraying opposition voices as putting at risk what has been a "proudly non-party political organisation" representing members whatever their opinion or backgrounds.

Samantha, a newly qualified nurse, said, "I have been a member of the RCN since I started university. ... The only thing that tempted me to stay after the pay deal was announced was the petition because I perhaps had an opportunity to help to change the direction of this organisation. I'm proud to say that I am one of the 1,017 who signed the petition."

Referring to Maria Trewern, the chair of Council, Samantha said, "I heard you speak of acknowledgement, apologies, recognition of some errors. ... Your actions have spoken so loudly I am unable to hear what you are saying. I trusted you and I'm afraid that my trust has gone."

An NHS worker from the south of England said of the RCN leaders, "They lied to us. They misled us. Eight years of austerity and attacks on our pay terms and conditions is not only an indictment against the RCN leadership, but against all the health unions. They colluded with the government to implement these

attacks.”

NHS FightBack, established by the Socialist Equality Party, called for a “yes” vote in its statement “**Vote ‘yes’** on resolution to force out Royal College of Nursing leadership! Build rank-and-file committees!”

This call was taken up by the worker who said, “We are here to fight against this. We need to take matters into our own hands. No more back door skulduggery. We cannot stop by just getting rid of some leaders. We need to build rank-and-file committees to unite workers in the public sector facing the same ruthless attacks.”

Answering a question from a member on whether the RCN would reopen the pay deal, Tom Sanford from the RCN leadership replied, “No, we don’t believe that the pay deal can be reopened, because we believe that the other trade unions involved in negotiating the deal would not cooperate.”

In other words, so rotten is the entire union bureaucracy that RCN members and all health workers will have to suffer what is a pro-management agreement that cuts wages.

The other health unions have not only refused to issue an apology to their memberships, but Unison Assistant General Secretary Christina McAnea denounced Davies for having done so, stating that that the RCN general secretary “had neither read nor understood the offer. It’s unfortunate that one person’s seeming lack of understanding has unleashed such an unhelpful and completely unnecessary wave of confusion for NHS staff.”

McAnea is aware that the union bureaucracy are sitting on a powder keg. Such is the level of anger at the sellout, the latest of many, that if their own members had a chance to vote, they too would kick out the union leaders.

None of the RCN’s top officials have stood down since the ballot and the EGM, issuing a statement that they would not yet accept the vote until it had been verified this week. The statement explains that “Council members and the College are now considering the next steps to be taken as RCN Council enters a period of transition.”

The RCN’s Council’s defiance of the will of the membership is evidence that the unions are not organisations representing the interests of workers but, as the pay deal shows, hostile bodies that fight only on behalf of the employers.

The vote against the RCN leaders is an important first step, but the fight is far from over. RCN members must demand the resignation of the entire Council membership and that the March pay deal be declared void. This must be fought for in a united offensive by all health workers, with the struggle to win decent pay and conditions made the focal point in opposition to the ongoing destruction and privatisation of the NHS.

To carry out a struggle, nurses and health care workers cannot allow themselves to be subordinated to the operations of the unions. NHS FightBack urges the formation of rank-and-file committees of action, *independently* of the unions, to organise and coordinate opposition.

We urge health workers to contact NHS FightBack to discuss these vital issues and take the struggle forward. Visit nhsfightback.org and facebook.com/Fight4theNHS.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>