

# HEALTH WORKERS CAN LEAD PAY FIGHT

Cross-union committees should campaign for a united claim for 15%

**J**ust a year ago, Tory ministers were applauding nurses, doctors, and cleaners as heroes and using “Save Our NHS” as a key slogan to inspire the fight against covid-19.

Now they are offering one million NHS staff a 3% pay raise when inflation is running at 3.9%. After decades of decline in real incomes, their “reward” is in fact a pay cut, equivalent to a £200 real-terms reduction according to the Royal College of Nursing.

This comes at a time when there are 90,000 vacancies in NHS England alone and staff are stretched to breaking point after over a year of work in pandemic conditions. Moreover, the pay rise will come out of the existing NHS budget so that if staff demand more, the media can easily transform them into selfish villains taking money away from patient care. True, the current offer is an improvement from the previously promised 1%, a reversal forced by an immediate public outcry. But even this inadequate proposal is riddled with loopholes.

Only half of the pay rise is a permanent increase, while the other half is a one-off payment. Outsourced NHS staff, including cleaners and porters, will be excluded from the offer, as will 61,000 junior doctors who make up a significant proportion of hospital medics. Many other key workers essential to patient care, including the entire social care workforce, are being subjected to a pay freeze.

After a year-long spending spree forced on the government by the pandemic, it seems that the old dictum that “there is no magic money tree” is about to reappear. No meaningful support will be forthcoming from the Labour leadership, who previously called for a 2.1% increase, and were outflanked by the Tories’ final offer!

The best that shadow health minister Justin Madders could muster in response to the government U-turn was that “the government must make our NHS and key workers feel supported and valued after all they have done for us.”

Rank-and-file health workers are campaigning for a 15% pay rise, an amount which would begin to reverse the erosion of real-terms pay through inflation and freezes since 2010. This claim is completely justified given more than a decade of austerity, and is even reinforced by some of the health unions’ official claims. Unite is calling for 15% or £3,000, whichever is greater, the GMB for 15% or £2 on the hour, the RCN for 12.5% and Unison – bringing up the rear as usual – for £2,000 for all pay grades, which amounts to 8% for the lowest paid.

## How to win

Past experience shows only industrial action or the genuinely credible threat of it will make this government back down.

The RCN has made a good start - its members in Scotland have already rejected a 4% offer from the devolved Scottish government, and the union nationally has set aside £35m to cover the costs of a potential strike. It is also training 25,000 “workplace activists” to help win any forthcoming strike ballot. Pat Cullen, the acting general secretary, has said: “The profession will not take this lying down. We will be consulting our members on what action they would like to take next.”

But victory will require a united front between all the health unions, who should collectively reject the current offer and unify their pay

claims at 15%.

To force the government’s hand, the unions will need to conduct national ballots for action and empower workplace activists to take charge of it in order to win.

The NHS unions should organise workplace protests outside hospitals across the country. Regular protests (for example every Thursday) could build towards much-needed industrial action by bringing together members of the many NHS unions in a joint campaign, building confidence and union membership, and setting up democratically elected strike committees to ensure the different unions stay united and that workers when to strike and for how long.

This is crucial, as the last strikes were demobilised and sold out by the Unison and RCN leaderships who deliberately misrepresented a government pay offer to their members, meaning many nurses received far less than they thought they were agreeing to.

Industrial action will be attacked by the government and media who will use extensive legal powers and blackmail to bully healthworkers into accepting poverty pay. But if the wider labour movement builds solidarity action through local councils of action, rank and file workers and young people can bypass the trade union bureaucracy’s inertia and paralysing fear of showing real solidarity.

Joint action committees in every workplace will be needed to coordinate action and ensure that negotiators unaccountable to the members don’t call off a strike before it achieves its goals.

In this way the healthworkers who have been at the forefront of protecting us from the pandemic, can open the way for all the trade unions to bring forward pay claims at the same time. That is the way to beat this government.

**REDFLAG**

## Left wins control of Unison NEC

**In a historic breakthrough the left has secured the majority of seats on the governing National Executive Council of Unison. This is the first time the left has had control of the NEC and it gives them significant but limited powers, notably the right to endorse strike action.**

Despite left divisions in the General Secretary elections giving an easy win to the right wing candidate Christine McAnea, Paul Holmes the branch secretary of Kirklees local government branch secured a creditable second place with 34%. His campaign, Time for Real Change, in an alliance with the Socialist Party, translated this momentum into 40 seats (out of 68) on the NEC.

The monthly meeting NEC can now start to undo some of the damage inflicted on 1.3 million Unison members, concentrated in the NHS and, local government and schools, over the past 25 years or more. Up till now, Unison has played a key role in undermining the fight against austerity in 2011, accepting cuts to pensions—straight after a huge one-day strike to oppose an almost identical package.

Inside the Labour Party, Unison also blocked the left wing leadership of Jeremy Corbyn and backed Keir Starmer's leadership campaign last year. The union appointed Emily Oldknow and John Stolliday, who we now know actively campaigned to undermine Labour's 2017 general election bid, to posts in Labour's HQ. The left now has a real opportunity to reverse that trend.

However, the apparatus of the union has a lot of conservative officials who are used to the old culture of obstructing the lay membership in their industrial disputes and campaigns. A number of the old guard have also been involved in vicious witch-hunts against left activists and left branches.

Unison in many ways is like Labour—dominated by the right who think they have a god given right to run the organisation. The left are seen as minority troublemakers. The new

leadership will be seen as insurgents, a temporary aberration before the NEC elections in 2023 return the right to their natural position of power. The NEC will no doubt face certain elements of entrenched opposition from within the structures and the old guard of the Unison right.

We now have to work hard to secure the gains, to launch campaigns that enthuse and energise members. For instance a proper industrial fight in the NHS over pay would help rebuild the failing health sector branches and bring new activists into the union.

### Obstacles

But here the size of the problem starts to emerge. In the Health Service Group, which governs policy for hundreds of thousands of members, 24 out of 36 seats were elected unopposed and five were left vacant; it is dominated by the old guard right and has opposed real campaigning and a realistic claim of a 15% pay rise, which has been accepted by most other unions. Even the RCN is calling for 12.5%.

Similarly the left control of the NEC also offers a real chance to transform Labour Link, the structure within the union for members who pay into the affiliated political fund, which goes to Labour. Labour Link has always been dominated by the right because half of its national committee comes from the NEC; the left has only been able to win a few seats in regional elections.

With Labour Link elections coming up, there will be a huge fight and we need to ensure the election of more left Labour activists onto that committee. Even then—due to the cumbersome and purposefully arcane procedures—it will take a good year for any real change to take affect in terms of Labour Party Conference delegates or the two Unison representatives on the Labour Party NEC.

But another note of caution is necessary, an important one. Only 6.6% of members voted in the regional parts of the elections and less than 10% in the service groups section. As noted above, many parts of the NHS do not have an active and functioning branch or, as in the case of St Thomas' and Guy's in London, witch-hunted activists who tried to

resuscitate the branch.

Branch activists must now co-ordinate real change from below, by campaigning for a united pay campaign for 15% across the public sector. Strong branches should reach out to weaker ones and those gripped by moribund right wing leaderships and place demands on the new NEC to lead the fight – and defend members whenever they are attacked by regional officials. If necessary, the new NEC should overrule the right wing bureaucrats and call co-ordinated strikes across the different sectors.

## What we stand for

**We are a revolutionary socialist organisation that fights for an alternative to capitalism based on common ownership and democratic planning to meet the needs of people and planet.**

- Our goal is communism: a society liberated from exploitation, oppression and war through the abolition of the class system.
- We organise a **revolutionary tendency inside the Labour Party** in order to oppose its reformist leadership and promote an anticapitalist programme.
- We campaign to **democratise the trade unions through a rank and file movement** which dissolves the unelected bureaucracy, and fights for workers' control of production.
- **We oppose all forms of discrimination** based on race, age, disability, sex or sexual orientation. We oppose all immigration controls and support black self-defence against racist and state attacks.
- We **unconditionally support** all those fighting against imperialism or national oppression, while fighting for socialist, not nationalist, leadership of those struggles. We are for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all British troops from Ireland and overseas bases. Britain out of Nato. Replace the standing army with a workers' militia.
- Against the dictatorship of capital **we stand for a society based on common ownership and democratic planning**. The bosses will never allow their wealth and privilege to be voted away. **That's why we fight for revolution and workers' power.**
- At the core of our strategy is the building of fighting organisations of the working class - factory committees, industrial unions, councils of action, and workers' defence organisations.
- We are internationalists and members of the **British section of the League for the Fifth International**, an organisation fighting to build a new world party of socialist revolution.

If you agree with what we stand for - join us!

# REDFLAG