

UNISON HEALTH CONFERENCE WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR HEALTH WORKERS?

Editorial

As we gather in Liverpool for UNISON Health Conference, it's worth reflecting on the fact that our members have been put through the wringer over the last two years.

Not only were many members in the front line from the start of the pandemic, we've also had to shoulder the burden of supporting families, covering for absent colleagues and trying to put services back together after huge dislocation.

Meanwhile the number of Covid infections is still growing and growing quickly. Thousands of staff have left the NHS with burnout due to the pressure they were under.

In every hospital, on every ward and in every clinic and service we are expected to do more with less people and less resources - and with pay that is being eaten away by growing inflation on top of everything else.

The news is full of horror stories about hospital waiting times, with harrowing accounts highlighting the impact of record waiting lists, especially upon women.

Pay Claim

No surprise, then, that some 80% of UNISON members who voted in last year's pay ballot voted for strike action. This is the highest proportion ever achieved in favour of such an outcome, and given the circumstances it is no surprise that the vote was to reject the pay offer.

However, as we know that wasn't the end of the story. Far from it, in fact.

Instead of throwing the whole weight of the union behind the campaign, we had prevarication from the Health Service Group Executive (SGE).

Instead of planning a series of actions and activities to build the movement, exhausted health members were presented with half-hearted days of action.



Instead of planning for strike action, members were asked to fill in surveys and sign petitions.

Instead of organising outdoor demonstrations and rallies (and yes, our members know how to organise safe activities!) the union restricted itself to repeatedly *"testing the water."*

The Tories and the employers must have been quaking in their boots!

The Road Not Taken

Of course, unless you keep the water boiling, sooner or later it will inevitably cool down. In the real world, members were demoralised by this prevarication from the top.

This reflects a huge issue for UNISON members: that is, a lack of leadership, perspective and direction in Health. The 2021 pay campaign was a huge missed opportunity to turn the situation around.

No doubt there will be some who argue that the turnout in the various "consultations" was low and that this justifies the hesitancy to organise, demonstrating that *"you can lead a horse to water... but you can't make it drink"*.

But leadership does not mean waiting until the horse is exhausted, showing it the water briefly and then leading it up the garden path and down a few blind alleys.... only to tell it that not enough horses voted to drink!

The Road Forward

The Health Service Group Executive will be under a lot of scrutiny over pay this year and rightly so. The question needs to be asked: what will the current SGE do differently this year?

It's clear that things need to change. UNISON Socialist Appeal supporters therefore stand in full solidarity with and support those comrades standing under the banner of Time for Real Change in the Health Service Group Executive elections, which start the day after Health Conference finishes.

What is needed is a strategy that mobilises members and gives them confidence, rather than hanging back from the fight. If UNISON were to undertake coordinated action with the other health unions in defence of our members, no government could resist it.

Such a movement could light a spark across the whole public sector and give workers across industries and unions the confidence to fight back. It could force the Tories from power, and if armed with a bold socialist programme, it could change the face of society entirely.

That is the prize that lies ahead of us - and it starts here, by fighting for a leadership that will actually organise the grassroots within the health SG. That's the real change that UNISON needs! ■

REVIEW 'THIS IS GOING TO HURT' CUTS AND PRIVATISATION TO BLAME

DR Raj Mistry,

Junior Doctor in the South of England

In the BBC's TV serialisation of Adam Kay's book, *This Is Going To Hurt*, we see the NHS for what it truly is: an underfunded, understaffed healthcare system held together by skeleton crews of exhausted workers.

The series starts with junior doctor Adam waking up in his car, having fallen asleep after a long shift. In reality, long hours, short breaks, and heavy workloads all contribute to the exhaustion reported by junior doctors. So much so that a quarter of doctors have reported that tiredness impairs their ability to work safely.

The show highlights the crisis enveloping the NHS, with fewer hospital beds, fewer staff, devastating community cuts, an astronomical patient backlog, and real-terms pay cuts for staff.

Sadly, however, it falls short of pointing the finger at the real culprit for these ills: Tory austerity and privatisation.

Glaring inequalities

While Adam works long hours and wrestles with graphic flashbacks, his consultant Mr Lockhart drives an expensive car and rarely visits the ward. Similarly, my trust's CEO sits on a six-figure salary, while emailing generic reminders every week to staff to work harder for our patients.

In an episode highlighting the two-tier healthcare system, Adam takes a shift in a private hospital. His workload consists of a single pregnant patient, and he is given his own deluxe suite and three-course-meal.

Yet when the patient becomes too unwell, she is rushed to the local NHS hospital. As a senior NHS midwife forlornly mutters: *"It's a shame we don't see any of the cash those poor patients spend."*

This is true. While our healthcare system slowly collapses, parasitic private sector bosses line their pockets with our money. The safety and lives of workers and patients are sacrificed at the altar of profit.

Epidemic of racism

The show also touches on the racism and abuse experienced by NHS staff.

Last month, a survey by the British Medical Association revealed that 76% of doctors from black and ethnic minority



backgrounds have experienced racism in the last year. 71% of these doctors did not report the incidents for fear of being labelled a 'trouble-maker', or because they have no faith in the reporting system.

While the series sadly did not touch on the racial inequalities amongst pregnant patients, we know that racism affects all, staff and patients alike. For example, maternal mortality for black patients is four times higher than for white patients in the UK.

The NHS may claim a 'zero tolerance' approach to racism. But the indifferent bureaucratic hierarchy does little in reality to protect workers and patients.

Mental health crisis

High workloads, racism, misogyny, bullying, and underfunding all add to the mental health crisis amongst staff. This is demonstrated in the series by the tragic story of junior doctor Shruti.

In a recent study by the University of Birmingham, 70% of junior doctor respondents reported severe anxiety and depression. Half of these stated they had even contemplated suicide.

In the series, bossy consultant Miss Houghton has no sympathy for Shruti's mental health. *"Well, it's a difficult job. What do you want me to say?"*, the callous manager bluntly states.

But the myth of resilience and a stiff upper lip crumble under the debilitating work conditions health workers face.

The solutions offered by the NHS bureaucracy include 'finding time for self-care' – this at a time when one-in-three junior doctors don't have time for a lunch break!

When one of my colleagues suggested that a solution was *"recruiting more doctors"*, she was met with a patronising smile and evasive platitudes by our Medical Director.

Common struggle

We must never forget the equally appalling work conditions of nurses, midwives,

healthcare assistants, and other vital staff. In one survey, 80% of midwives did not believe that their NHS Trust had enough staff to operate safely.

Meanwhile, over half of nurses are considering or actively planning to leave their job. The government's recent pathetic offer of a 1% pay rise – a massive real wage cut, given soaring inflation – will continue to drive staff out of the NHS.

The same hospital management who heap pressure on clinical staff often abandon outsourced workers to exploitation by companies like Serco. The forces that strip the wards of staff and resources, in other words, also underpay and bully our porters, cleaners, and estates crew.

Fight back

Faced with the misery of work in the NHS, Adam looks into alternative careers. The cynical Miss Houghton delivers the demoralising climax of the show:

"This hospital's got about three doctors and a budget of £12.50...there is bollocks-all any of us here can do."

But this is not true. Already, the unions are moving into action and preparing for the industrial struggle. Workers are resisting attacks on their conditions, winning major victories, and showing that there is much we can do – if we're organised.

The capitalist decimation of the NHS must be stopped in its tracks.

We must fight for a health and social care sector run democratically by workers.

We must fight for a health and social The private sector, including hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry, must be nationalised without compensation. Led by the trade unions, we need a massive recruitment drive of doctors, nurses and all healthcare professionals on a fair wage.

Only through militant socialist action can we end the greed of the capitalist class and the bloated NHS bureaucracy, and save our NHS ■

CRISIS IN THE NHS PAY AND CONDITIONS

Amanda Martin

Assistant Branch Secretary

Tees, Esk & Wear Valleys Health

The pandemic exposed the real crisis in the NHS, revealing existing cracks in the system that have only worsened. This disproportionately affects women who make up 80% of our union.

Health workers have faced huge challenges including health and safety, PPE shortages, fear of spreading the virus to vulnerable family members and juggling home schooling.

For more than a decade, the NHS has faced reductions in beds, cuts in services and thousands of unfilled vacancies, causing sickness and stress, with our women members shouldering most of the burden.

Pay and Conditions

On top of this, members are confronted with ongoing attacks on pay and conditions under this Tory government.

We have had to endure the callous withdrawal of the vital £20 Universal Credit uplift alongside increases in national insurance and fuel price hikes.

These are felt particularly sharply by our women members trying to balance



the family finances: choosing between heating and eating, in effect. In my area, pay is the main area of concern for worried members.

There is no sign yet of the much proclaimed "council tax rebate" for some households, which will in any case

be immediately swallowed up by the increased costs of food, fuel and heating.

Food bank use in the North East as in other areas is increasing, and we are now seeing other "banks" for clothing and other essential household items. It is almost unbelievable that we have to have charities to provide some children with the basics such as a bed to sleep in!

Mobilise and Organise!

Health members voted to reject the government's pay offer in 2021. Unison should move to a formal ballot if the government does not agree to a significant pay rise for the NHS this year – not the miserly 3% which will no doubt be on offer again.

This must form the first step of a campaign for national action, including a one-day public sector strike to demonstrate our strength as workers, which can be used to topple this Tory government once and for all.

This capitalist crisis affects every part of our lives, and we must make a stand. Only by coordinating action with other unions, in the health service and across the whole public sector, can we turn the tide in our favour ■

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UNISON MARXISTS' CHARTER

Bold measures are required to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Only a clear socialist programme can offer a way forward.

We must have no faith in the Tories or their hangers-on, whose worship of the market has brought this country to its knees.

Instead of attacking the left, Labour must provide genuine opposition to this sham-bolic Tory government. Support workers in the fight to put lives before profits!

The bosses and their craven political representatives have shown what their priorities are. We must establish and fight for our own. Therefore, we demand the following socialist measures to protect workers, and put health before wealth.

We demand:

- For a fully-funded, publicly-owned, and free health service, under workers' control and management.
- Reverse all privatisation and outsourcing. All private health and care services must be nationalised without compensation, and integrated into the NHS.
- Nationalise the pharmaceutical companies - without compensation - in order to ensure that medicines and vaccines are produced rapidly, efficiently, and made freely available to all worldwide.
- Workplace safety must be in the hands of workers' committees and the trade unions. Proper health and safety measures must be

implemented, with adequate PPE provided for all workers. The costs for this must be paid for by the bosses.

- A proper living wage must be provided to all workers of at least £15 an hour. End all forms of discrimination; equal pay for equal work. This includes age discrimination, where young workers are forced to work for a fraction of the real minimum wage.
- Any future lockdowns or restrictions must be accompanied by measures to provide for workers affected by workplace closures. This means 100% wage support for those furloughed, as well as full sick pay for those required to isolate.
- If the bosses say they cannot afford to pay for workers' wages, we say: open up the books! Let the working class and the labour movement see the accounts. If firms plead bankruptcy, they should not be bailed out but nationalised under workers' control.
- Labour councils must not administer and implement Tory cuts and austerity. They must instead fight to reverse the austerity inflicted on public services.
- All elected officials in the labour movement should be subject to the immediate right of recall by the members, and take the wage of an average member of their labour organisation.
- Ban evictions and cancel housing debts. Give local authorities the power to cap rents at affordable

levels. Bring empty properties and the assets of the big landlords and management companies under public control.

- The financial resources required to fight the crisis must not come from increased taxes or more austerity cuts. Nationalise the banks under public ownership and control. Rather than a "wealth tax" we call for the total expropriation of these financial monopolies.
- Nationalise the 100 biggest monopolies under workers' control and management, and without compensation to the capitalists. On this basis the economy can be democratically planned in the interests of the majority, and not for the super profits of a tiny few.

The coronavirus crisis has exposed the global nature of the crisis of capitalism. A Socialist Federation of Britain should be linked to a World Socialist Federation, in order to plan resources internationally for the benefit of all.

This would put an end to the barbarism of capitalism and allow humanity to begin solving the urgent issues of climate change, disease, and poverty that face our planet.

If you agree with our programme here, get involved with Socialist Appeal in Unison and help us fight for a better, socialist world!

WHY YOU SHOULD JOIN US

Marxists are class conscious fighters for socialism. As Marx explained, we should be regarded as the most resolute section of the working class.

Marxism arms us with a conscious understanding of society and the class struggle. Only by absorbing this outlook can we lay the foundation for the overthrow of capitalism.

For us, Marxism is the science of social revolution and therefore needs to be studied.

Our tendency therefore stresses the need to educate and train our members in Marxist theory and the struggles of the working class. This gives us considerable advantages. First and foremost, Marxist theory is a guide to action, a guide to the class struggle.

As isolated individuals we can do very little. However, organised together

we can achieve a considerable amount. Organisation allows us to concentrate our forces to much greater effect. Based on correct policies and perspectives, we can intervene effectively in the class struggle.

The present reformist leadership of the labour movement has led to one retreat after another. In practice they accept capitalism and its limits.

The leadership of the Labour Party is now in the grip of the right wing, who serve the interests of capitalism. This revival is due to the weakness of the left to act decisively, which in turn is a reflection of the weakness of reformism.

Likewise, the reformist trade union leadership has failed to meet the challenges we face. They are lagging completely behind the objective situation. For them, it is simply 'business as usual.'

But the crisis of capitalism is posing massive challenges in front of the working

class. We will fight shoulder to shoulder with those prepared to fight. In doing so, we will point to the future needs of the movement.

Our task is to provide the necessary clarity for the struggle. Capitalism cannot be reformed; it needs to be consciously overthrown by the working class in Britain and internationally. That is why we are internationalists and proud to be part of the International Marxist Tendency ■

