

Workers' Liberty

A bulletin for UNISON members by UNISON members

Special NHS Pay Ballot Issue: May 2008

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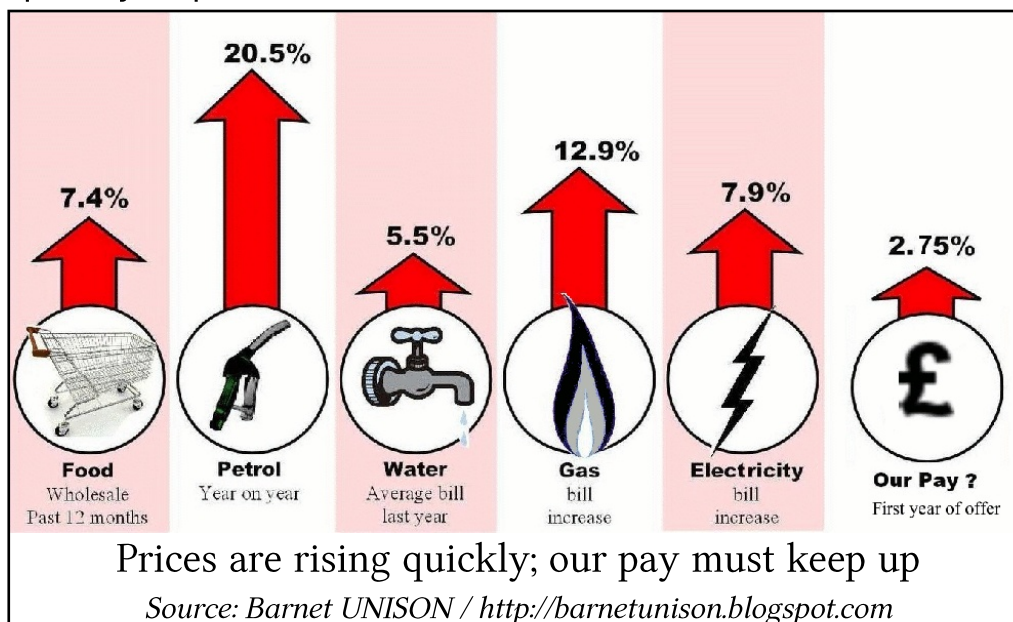


We must reject the three year pay cut Time to fight!

A pay offer covering the next three years is being put to health workers this month. While most unions have rejected the offer out of hand, and only the RCN are recommending acceptance, UNISON members are being balloted. The national leadership of UNISON is completely split on whether it should be accepted or rejected. UNISON members who are supporters of Workers' Liberty are convinced we should reject the offer. We also believe that uniting with other public sector workers can win NHS staff a better offer.

after last year's pay rise was staged by the government that health workers would not accept another below inflation rise this year. Now we're being invited to accept three of them!

Health workers gain nothing by agreeing to a three year deal now. The government would be very happy to lock us in to below inflation rises at a time when the economy is very



The three year offer proposes pay rises worth just 2.75% this year, 2.4% next year and 2.25% in the third year. There are some minor additions to these figures for staff on particular pay points, but most NHS staff would see their spending power fall each year as the offer fails to keep rate with rising prices. The offer is effectively a pay cut.

UNISON head of health Karen Jennings said

volatile, and they'd also be able to go into the next General Election having avoided a pay dispute in the NHS. Creating a low paid workforce in the NHS will make it easier to privatise. But for health workers the issue is clear: if we don't fight now, the next time we will have a chance to improve our pay, we might be under a Tory government. We must fight for better pay now!

Public sector workers need to unite

We're not alone

On April 24th, teachers, University lecturers and civil servants were on strike in the first stage of their fight for an above inflation pay rise for 2008. The core of their dispute is the government's insistence that public sector workers should get pay rises worth no more than 2%, while inflation continues to be roughly double that.

So it's not just healthworkers. Besides the teachers, lecturers and civil servants who have already taken action, local council workers (our fellow UNISON members) are now balloting for

industrial action in support of their pay claim, having rejected their employers' offer in a consultative ballot. Council workers in Scotland have rejected a three year pay offer of 2.5% per year. Workers in OFSTED are on strike on 16 May, following an overwhelming rejection of a 2% pay offer.

And workers in the probation service have already had a taste of what is to come when their bosses told them that they intended to ignore their pay scales and not implement incremental pay rises this year - meaning many staff would lose hundreds of pounds a year. UNISON and NAPO are balloting

members for industrial action, and calling on them to vote yes, in support of a union pay claim worth 5%. The unions' joint statement says, "an offer based on the Treasury remit of

2% when inflation is running at 4% would mean a further pay cut in real terms". The issues are the same right across the public sector. We should unite, and coordinate our fightback.

Some in the UNISON health group - including some of the officers in the union's head office -

want to play down the chances of joint action with other public sector workers. There are also some people willing to describe the NHS pay offer as an "increase", even though UNISON members in other services are being encouraged to reject similar rises because they are pay cuts in real terms. But surely we are all stronger if we take action together. And with so many unions already fighting over pay this year, it is hard to imagine a better time for health workers to take action.

Of course taking industrial action is not easy. But

"If inflation is 4 per cent and you offer a pay award of 2 per cent that is a pay cut in anybody's language."

TUC General Secretary, Brendan Barber

trying to make ends meet on an ever-decreasing pay packet is not easy either! And we're stronger together, as UNISON's recruitment campaigns remind us.

There really is no justification for the

timidity shown by some of UNISON's leaders in the health service. Despite the UNISON Health Service Group Executive being unable to decide whether to recommend for or against the pay offer, recent documents produced by UNISON officials at head office seem to be trying to encourage members to view it as a good deal (it isn't) and to suggest that rejecting it would mean taking all-out strike action isolated from other workers (it wouldn't). UNISON members could be forgiven for thinking that their leaders want them to accept the pay offer!

We cannot rely on these people to fight for our

"This year we need a substantial above inflation pay rise; health workers cannot afford another pay cut."

UNISON Head of Health, Karen Jennings

pay rise. If we're going to organise the kind of campaign which won health workers significant pay increases in 1974 and 1982 then we need to see a return to some grassroots organising, and some

local rank-and-file initiative. We will also need to see some new leaders to replace those who have lost confidence in the union's ability to fight against pay cuts. But the starting point is simple: we must encourage every UNISON member to reject the pay offer.

A strategy to win

Health workers can take effective industrial action

No-one is suggesting that we should accept the pay offer because it is a good deal for NHS staff. But there are people who say that it may be the best we can hope for.

Some of that pessimism is understandable. Health workers haven't taken industrial action, other than on sectional or local issues, for a very long time, and our unions are weaker and less organised than they once were. But it is simply untrue to think that health workers cannot take effective industrial action, or that strikes in the NHS would have to mean putting patients' lives at risk.

Recent strikes by nurses and other health workers in Ireland, Canada, Australia and Sweden have all featured various forms of action and tactics designed to hit hospital managers rather than patients. There is plenty of evidence that health workers can take effective industrial action without harming patients.

There are even some examples from within UNISON's own history. The forerunner to UNISON, the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) organised two very effective pay campaigns in 1974 and 1982, which resulted in significant pay increases for nursing staff and other health workers.

The tactics employed by the COHSE members, and those used by the Irish nurses in their successful campaign last year, were very similar.

It is an unfortunate reflection of the state of the trade unions, that there is very little discussion about tactics for effective industrial action amongst health workers, and probably only a small minority remember the 1982 pay dispute. But the 'Action Plan' drawn up by COHSE's Action Committee for that dispute makes a very good starting point for a discussion about the kinds of tactics we might use in 2008.

Clearly some things have changed since 1982, but the general principles of the COHSE action plan - seeking to cause administrative inconvenience to hospital management rather than harm to patients, combining selective and

short strikes with a ban on non-emergency work and local demonstrations to keep the issue in the public eye - would be a solid starting point for a 2008 action plan.

It's a further illustration of the weakness of the unions today that none of the health unions, including those which have decisively rejected the pay offer, have issued any kind of action plan indicating to their members how they might run a campaign to win a decent pay rise. Producing an action plan is an essential first step to convincing people that rejecting the pay offer makes sense. Only when health workers believe it is possible to win something better will they feel confident enough to reject the offer on the table.

The COHSE Action Plan

The Action Committee set up by COHSE's National Executive Committee met on 13 April 1982 and drew up a comprehensive range of recommendations for industrial action to be taken up by branches.

The two main forms to be applied within the COHSE guidelines on the protection of patient care and maintenance of emergency services are:

- a ban on all non-emergency admissions; and
- selective two hour withdrawals of labour.

A further list was also set out, again within COHSE's Code of Conduct and within the 1979 Joint Agreement on Emergency Services. The proposals, as well as the emergency services agreement, are listed in Head Office Circular 235/82. Designed to cause the greatest administrative inconvenience to management and least harm to patients, they include:

- a ban on private patients' services;
- non co-operation with private contractors;
- a refusal by nurses to carry out non-nursing duties, as well as by non-nurses to carry out nursing duties;
- a ban on the cleaning of non-clinical areas;
- a reduction of output of hospital laundries;
- holding of local demonstrations.

Irish Nurses: Back Into Action?

At the recent annual conference of the Irish Nurses' Organisation, delegates backed a call to ballot for industrial action if their demands for a 10% pay rise are not accepted by the Government.

Last year nurses in Ireland organised a very effective campaign of industrial action - combining short strikes of an hour or two in different hospitals every day with refusals to carry out certain non-nursing duties and frequent major demonstrations and rallies - to force the Government to concede both a significant pay increase and a promise to deliver a shorter working week.



Irish nurses march for higher pay last year

Following on from that campaign, Irish nurses have been determined to make the Government keep its promises. The impact of the action they took last year has given them the confidence to challenge the government yet again over the 'benchmarking' process which was supposed to deliver better pay for public sector workers but ended up justifying nurses' current low rates.

The fact that the INO has committed itself to further industrial action if their demand for a 10% rise is not met shows that nurses, and other health workers, can organise effective industrial action, and that having done so, they can hope to win major improvements in pay, working conditions and their standard of living.

Find out more about the Irish nurses' pay dispute: <http://www.ino.ie>

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Ideas for Freedom

Ideas for Freedom is the AWL's annual "summer school" - a whole weekend dedicated to debate and discussion around current issues and also political theory and analysis.

Sessions this year include debates on workers' representation after the May elections, a debate with French socialists about May '68, a session on the politics of Simone de Beauvoir, analysis of the current state of the trade unions, a review of the recent Italian elections, and very much more. There will be introductory sessions on Marxism, understanding 'Capital', and a debate on the state of the world economy.

Ideas for Freedom 2008 takes place at the Holloway Road Resource Centre in north London, between Friday 11th and Sunday 13th July.

More details about the event, and tickets for Ideas for Freedom are available from the AWL website: www.workersliberty.org

Who we are

This bulletin has been written by UNISON members in the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, an organisation fighting as part of the labour movement for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism; an alternative based on common ownership and democracy.

We try to transform the unions into active, accountable and fighting organisations; at every level from the shop floor to the national conference we argue for the unions to be more inclusive, more dynamic and more democratic.

As well as producing regular bulletins for UNISON members we also produce daily bulletins at UNISON conferences, and write regularly on health issues for the Workers' Liberty website and our fortnightly paper, Solidarity.

We believe that there is an alternative to the passivity and defeatism that is common in many of our trade unions. It is possible to fight, it is possible to win, and it is possible to change our union, our working lives, and our world.

We welcome discussion and debate with other health workers. Contact us at unison@workersliberty.org or via the website. If you agree that this work needs doing, then help us, and join the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.