Red Pulse
Health Bulletin of the Workers Power Group
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ALL OUT AND STAY OUT!

FEBRUARY 3rd saw thousands of health workers throughout the country striking against low pay and cuts in the NHS. Since then more one day strikes have happened in Manchester and Liverpool, days of protest have been organised by COHSE South-East region and the Scottish TUC.

The actions by hospital workers and the support from other trade unionists have been tremendous. But how can can we turn this anger and protest into action that will win?

The union leaders have abandoned the 'wait and see' approach they took towards 3 February. Then they waited and saw that thousands of their members took strike action—organised not by the national unions but by local strike committees. These head office bureaucrats now want to take control of the action to make sure it doesn't get too serious - they fear that co-ordinated strike action will frighten off that public opinion they value so highly—the opinion not of the working class but of the media and press! If they want to see the real effect of strike action on the working class they should join us on the picket lines and see how many workers support us and are even preparing to take action with us.

The way that the union leaders are trying to take control of the dispute is through calling one-day actions here there and everywhere to make sure we all think they are doing something. They will not call strike action and will try to make sure that whatever action does happen is 'rolling'. That is, one region rolling out as another rolls back in again!

The problem with these one-day and regional actions is that they just don't work. The 1982 dispute showed us that organising one-day strikes and then back to work, then two day strikes and back to work. The Tories were able to sit back and watch us all wear ourselves out, the hospitals functioned, and in the end health workers got demoralised and the union sold us out. This happened again with the teachers and civil servants who tried selective action.

The only way to show the depth of our anger, and to force the Tories to retreat is to go out and stay out!

The day of action called for 14 March must be turned into a massive strike. On the day every hospital should hold a mass meeting of strikers to discuss the way forward—and vote to stay out until we win.

But we can't trust the union leadership to organise any effective action. Whilst we call on them to organise an all out strike we must not rely on them. We should organise strike committees in every hospital, send delegates to the all-London strike committee which has been set up, and support their call for a national conference of stewards and strike committee delegates on 26 March.

Build Solidarity action

Ford workers showed that the bosses can be made to retreat when workers take all out strike action. By stopping the flow of profits they so alarmed Ford bosses in America that they in turn forced Ford UK to improve their offer. Although not a complete victory (the deal was still lousy!), it does demonstrate how hitting profits hurts the bosses.

NHS workers are, by themselves, in a weaker position than Ford workers. We create no direct profits, we only help to maintain the health of those who do. Whilst an all out strike in the NHS would shake the Tories and force them to retreat, this would be helped enormously if we win workers like those in Fords to strike with us. They would hit their bosses profits again, and this can only help our cause by putting even more pressure on our bosses.

This is why links must be made with private sector workers as well as those in the rest of the public sector. We must start to build now for solidarity strikes on the 14 March. We should use every opportunity to go out to other workers and argue for solidarity action. This means local hospital strike committees drawing up lists of local workplaces, contacting the stewards, asking to speak at meetings and leafletting the workers. Post office sorting offices, local transport workers, Fords and Kent miners - we should visit them all!

Hopefully many workers will vote to come out in support on14 March. But we can make this more effective by actually sending flying pickets out on the 14th - it worked at Frickley colliery on 3 February! That way we can turn the massive sympathy other workers have for our cause into solidarity strike action to help us win!

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TORIES OUTLAW EFFECTIVE ACTION

On 3 February, Frickley miners struck in support of the health workers. In doing so they broke the law. When Vauxhall workers at Ellsmere Port struck in support of us, they too were breaking the law.

Thatcher has made it illegal for workers to strike in solidarity with other workers. And she has made it illegal to strike without a secret ballot.

Our own leaders have paved the way for this attack on trade unionism. Their bureaucratic rule, their refusal to listen to the voice of their members, has allowed Thatcher to pose as the friend of the rank and file.

The bosses claim their laws have made the unions more democratic. They are lying through their teeth. What they are trying to do is to stifle the workers' democracy and solidarity on which our strength depends.

This is what the compulsory secret ballot is all about. When workers decide on whether or not to take action they need full debate and discussion in their ranks. That is the purpose of mass meetings. They need to know who will and who will not act. That is the purpose of the show of hands voting that workers have traditionally employed when deciding on action.

SECRET BALLOTS

The Tories' laws put an end to all that. Instead workers must decide on action in a secret ballot. They must do so without a clear knowledge of the balance of forces in their ranks. In other words it isolates workers from each other. This in turn leaves them open to press and media campaigns against action.

In addition, a secret ballot takes time. Sometimes many weeks. This delay helps the bosses. It allows time for workers' anger to drain away and for the trade union leaders to do dirty deals with management.

You may have thought democracy was about the rule of the majority. Not according to the Tories. They now want to introduce a new law which will make it illegal for a union to discipline members who refuse to abide by 'democratic decisions'. They will make it against the law to try and stop scabs. A government officer will be appointed to aid and abet the scabs against the unions.

In fact the Tory laws are aimed at stopping strike action, behind the facade of democracy. That is why they outlaw solidarity strikes altogether. That is why they make the nurses picket line at Frickley colliery illegal. If we do not break the law we cannot beat the the Tories.

We need mass meetings and mass decision making. We need more and more solidarity action. That is why we need to trample on their laws. And why we must back any group of workers that the laws are used against.

RCN ballot

TREVOR CLAY has just called a secret ballot to decide whether the RCN should drop its no-strike clause. Does this mean he has had a change of heart and is now committed to militant industrial action? Far from it!

The fact is that up and down the country hundreds of nurses have been leaving the RCN to join trade unions - NUPE and COHSE branches have been running out of memebrship forms! Clay is desparate to stop this flood out of his college and hopes that raising the possibility of strike action in the future will keep some of 'his' nurses from leaving.

He, of course, is still against strike action, and is no doubt confident that the large numbers of managers and their stooges in the ranks of the RCN will vote to keep the clause.

Any nurses who think that winning this ballot would turn the RCN into a real union should think again. The no-strike clause is only one of the problems with the RCN. Even without it the RCN would still be a 'professional' association committed to negotiating codes of conduct and improving its own status rather than fighting for the interests of its members. Because it is dominated by management grades in nursing it can never represent most nurses and students who need a union to fight for better pay and conditions.

Nurses need to be in a TUC-affiliated union alongside other health workers, not a professional college with their managers! Ignore the ballot! Leave the RCN, join NUPE or COHSE and strike on March 14th!

Red Pulse is a health workers bulletin produced by supporters of the Workers Power Group, which is a revolutionary communist organisation.
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