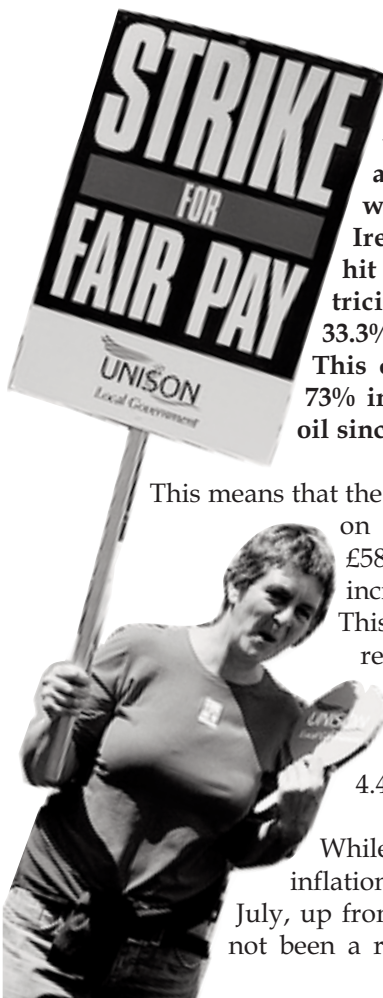


THE HEALTH WORKER

The bulletin
for fighting &
democratic
unions in the
health service

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ACTION ON PAY NEEDED NOW



There can be no more waiting to re-open negotiations over the 2008 pay award for health care workers as Northern Ireland communities are hit with increases in electricity and gas prices of 33.3% and 19.2% respectively. This comes on the back of a 73% increase of home heating oil since last year.

This means that the average NIE bill will rise on average from £439 to £585, while gas bills will increase from £577 to £689. This is as official Govt figures reveal the Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation has jumped from 3.8% in June to 4.4% in August 08.

While Retail Prices Index (RPI) inflation rose to 5.0 per cent in July, up from 4.6 per cent. There has not been a rise this large in the CPI

since 1997, with the new figure now more than twice the government's official 2% target.

This increase on energy prices is the last straw in the attack on working class living standards. The latest data from the Office of National Statistics has shown the largest upward pressure on family incomes is from soaring food prices, which have rocketed a record 13.7% in the past year.

Figures show essential household items are at almost five times the Bank of England's inflation target of 2%. It is clear that we are now in a situation where large sections of the working class have to make decisions on whether to heat or eat.

This is unacceptable.

For a one day public sector strike

While the vote at this year's TUC conference endorsing a plan for a major national demonstration against the government's pay policy has to be commended, it does not go far enough.

This was highlighted by Brian Caton of the Prison Officers' Association (POA) who tabled an amendment calling for a series of strikes across the public sector.

All public sector unions must now show a unified front and call for a one day general strike alongside the civil service, prison services and teachers unions who are planning a series of strike days starting in November.

MORE INSIDE

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Time to build a shop stewards network in Northern Ireland

The power of the trade unions needs to be rebuilt from the bottom up.

In the past much of the success of the trade unions came from the powerful shop stewards movement that existed. That power was eroded by the decimation of industry and the attacks on trade unions begun under Thatcher and continued under New Labour. It is time to rebuild the shop stewards movement.

By Pat Lawlor

With this in mind I attended National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) which has been set up in Britain. Its second Conference was held in London at the end of June and was attended by over 200 delegates and 75 visitors. The National Shop Stewards Network is supported at national and regional level by unions like the RMT, CWU, PCS, POA and NUM.

Membership of the NSSN is open to all elected trade union reps who are not full time paid officials. Meetings are also open to all union members. Its main aims are to support and help to co-ordinate trade union campaigns and struggles.

There is clearly a need for a similar network in Northern Ireland where we face the same attacks on pay and on services from New Labour and from the Assembly.

The first step will be to call a meeting to consider setting up a local network. A list of those who might be interested is being drawn up so that invitations can be sent out.



If you are interested in getting involved in building a shop stewards network here, contact me at the email address below.

Pat Lawlor, UNISON Nursing Convenor (personal capacity)

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Tel No 07810522111*

Management's hypocritical approach to hygiene

As the Belfast Trust senior executives demand over £160 million in savings through cuts in services, staff and changes to terms and conditions, it appears that hypocrisy by senior management knows no bounds when it comes to healthcare workers.

Early in September staff were offered unlimited overtime in an attempt by management to bring hygiene standards up to required levels in advance of the upcoming independent hygiene audit by the Health Board. The question must be asked why the Belfast Trust needs to give extensive amounts of overtime to maintain the target for hygiene standards, as this goes directly against their "ethos of efficiency and modernisation".

The answer is that it's not about hygiene but about the audit. The no expense spared attitude of senior

management to hygiene standards will be a fleeting approach, which will disappear like snow on the first days of spring when the auditors move on to somewhere else.

Hard pressed domestic staff are not fooled by this as we have seen the same schemes played out before. Cleaning staff will remember 'Best Value' that resulted in staff cuts and restructuring of terms and conditions. The consequence of this was a poorer service for all and targets that were unachievable.

This is unacceptable at a time that infection control rates are at an all time high with 1 in 20 people catching an infection while in hospital. No one



can question that infection control rates are directly related to bed occupancy, fast turn over of patients and staffing levels.

While domestic staff must be commended for providing the best service under impossible circumstances, we must now make a stand against further decimation of this integral part of healthcare provision. Bedside and Hygiene staff must

link up with other frontline workers such as portering, transport and nursing and demand their trade unions organise a fight back against these cuts.

A Domestic and Unison Member

Nursing graduates can't get jobs

This month hundreds of nursing graduates will leave both the University of Ulster and Queens to start their nursing careers. Many have already found that the number of nursing posts open to them in the recently restructured healthcare trusts is meagre at best. There were mass applications for interviews with the Belfast Trust with only the prospect of 'going on the list' for consideration when the next vacant post arrives, if at all. This is no guarantee of an offer of a post and the list commonly expires with many names still on it.

But this situation does not make sense. The reality is that many wards are understaffed and are crying out for more nurses, but the finance isn't being made available to make it hap-

pen. This is unfair on the current staff as they are saddled with the extra workload, which can also compromise patient safety.

Many nursing graduates did not even get an interview from the last round of applications. Situations like this have forced some to look for work in England and further afield. Some students at a recent open day in Magee campus alluded to signing up to work for the Territorial Army as they were the only people actively recruiting nurses that day, even though this would likely mean working in either of the dangerous war zones of Iraq or Afghanistan!

Of the jobs that have been offered many are on temporary contracts that offer no job security or are bank positions which are no guarantee of regu-

lar work. There is also evidence that at least one trust is recruiting staff nurses directly through private sector nursing agencies rather than the more expensive advertising and interviewing route. This is unfair as only the nurses working for a specific agency will be considered for a post.

Graduating nurses have spent the last three years constantly training for a nursing post and many have got into debt to fund this as they found they couldn't continue to study solely on the miniscule bursary. Surely the trusts would benefit from directly recruiting these nurses now rather than lose them to elsewhere in the UK, to the private sector or even to another career.

A Nursing Graduate, UNISON Member.

End exploitation of student nurses

Nursing Student QUB & UNISON Member

As a 2nd year nursing student at Queens University Belfast, I have become painfully aware of the issues facing nursing students today.

The impact of huge living costs and the prospect of further job cuts are forcing nursing students to re-think their prospects of a career in nursing. The extent of nursing shortages has resulted in undermining the standard of patient care, while nurses regularly go without breaks, work extended hours and put up with excessive workload in an attempt to provide the best care they can. The effects of this on student nurses is dire, as nurse mentors have little or no time to provide support and training to their students through no fault of their own.

On entering a clinical placement we are told that we will be supernumerary, this means that we have the expectation to gain the optimum experience and training possible, as we are not counted as staff. We should have the opportunity to dis-

cuss and carry out all aspect of nursing care within the multidisciplinary team. We should be given the freedom to leave the ward to gain experiences in other disciplines of care provision. The reality is very different! Most students never get the chance to achieve all their learning objectives never mind leave the ward unless it is to wheel a patient to other departments, as portering staff has been decimated by job cuts. Student nurses are regularly counted as nursing staff on the ward due to a lack of trained nurses.

As the health trusts slash health workers to meet the £160 million efficiency cuts, student nurses will be expected to carry out more and more of the jobs of the staff who have lost their career. This is on top of the tremendous pressures of attaining our nurse qualification, as we are expected to meet clinical competencies, targets for essay assignments and examinations.

On top of this we are expected to live on a bursary of less than £1 per hour, so it is not surprising that most stu-

dents have to take on other jobs to make ends meet. The current economic crisis and exorbitant rises in household essentials is only going to push students further in to debt and poverty. I currently have to try and coordinate a 9 hour clinical shift only then having to go on to work as a waitress until midnight, while writing assignments and study for exams. It is not surprising that 25% of nursing students leave the course between the first and second semester.

It is essential now more than ever that student nurses begin to organise and campaign through their trade unions demanding action now. At a time when healthcare workers are being forced to bare the brunt of so-called 'modernisation and efficiency savings'. **Student nurses must now begin to campaign on how we are supposed to learn the essential skills required to provide optimum nursing care. While living on slave wages expected to cover the increasing staff shortages and supplement our income with second and third jobs.**

DEFEND PAT LAWLOR

■ **NO witch-hunt
of socialists**

■ **NO expulsion**

The regional leadership of UNISON in Northern Ireland are so fearful of a growing opposition they are intent on silencing all voices of resistance within the union.

This is why they are attempting to expel me from the union for the "crime" of daring to criticise their role during last year's Classroom Assistant strike. I am also accused of defending myself by writing and distributing articles such as this.

The Regional leadership of Unison – who are unelected – have tried to get me suspended from my position as nurses' convenor even though they have no power to do so. I was elected by members in nursing and it is they who should decide whether I stay as convenor or not. The attempt by the leadership to remove me is an attack on the right of members to choose their own union representative.

While the NEC are focused on carrying out disciplinary action against me, it has become apparent since the end of the classroom assistant's dispute that the strikers were correct in the position they took over the job evaluation process. The Education and Library Board have since advertised for posts with new terms and conditions that are in effect a cut in basic pay and downgrading of professional qualifications. This will also affect UNISON members.



I am being witch hunted because of my socialist political views. It is of no coincidence that my disciplinary hearing on the 2nd – 3rd October coincides with the disciplinaries of four other Socialist Party UNISON members in Britain commencing on September 30th to October 2nd 2008. This is clearly a coordinated witch hunt of UNISON members whose track record of challenging the leadership and defending their members is unsurpassed.

I intend to vigorously defend myself and to uphold the democratic rights of all UNISON members. Support me by demanding from UNISON that no action be taken against me.

**Pat Lawlor UNISON Convenor
(Personal Capacity)**

Who we are

This bulletin has been written and produced by union activists in the health service, including members of the Socialist Party. We believe in building a strong united trade unions to defend health workers and the health service.

Contact us with any issues you feel need publicised in the next Health Worker Bulletin.
Tel: 07810522111

WHAT WE STAND FOR

- ▶ An immediate increase of the minimum wage to £8 per hour as a step to the European Decency Threshold.
- ▶ Trade union action to enforce these minimum rates.
- ▶ For a 35 hour week without loss of pay.
- ▶ Scrap anti-trade union laws
- ▶ Full employment protection rights from day one of employment.
- ▶ Stop the sell-off of healthcare services to private companies for profit.
- ▶ Provide adequate funding of all public services.
- ▶ No back-door privatisation of services through PFI or other schemes.
- ▶ No attack on pension entitlements – no increase in pension age. For a living state pension linked to average earnings.
- ▶ Build the left in the unions. Unions to be democratically controlled by the membership.
- ▶ All fulltime union officials to be regularly elected, and paid the average wage of their members.

How you can help

If you are interested in distributing the Health Worker bulletin or in any other way helping to build the campaign for fighting, democratic health unions contact:
lawlorsrus@aol.com