

NURSES in the NHS: IF THEY LOSE, WE ALL LOSE

Recent months have seen a growing militancy among Britain's NHS nurses, who are more than fed up with how their dedication to patients has been taken advantage of by successive governments until they have become, arguably, the most exploited of the cinderella professions.

Nurses are calling the government's latest pay offer an insult. The proposed 4 to 8% (depending on grade) falls far short of the straight 12% demanded by the nurses. Furthermore, a third of the government's surprise injection of £63 million to their offer is supposed to come from the regional health authorities, but the government didn't even bother to consult them before making the offer! Not surprisingly, the unions are refusing to negotiate.

It has to be remembered that the unions are fighting for 12% for *all* health workers, not just nurses. Recently Albert Spanwich, general secretary of COHSE, warned that the union would resist any attempt by the government to treat nurses as a special case at the expense of other workers. NUPE, the other health workers' union, backs this, though the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) have always maintained that nurses are a special case.

Health workers are now thrashing out just what action to take. An all-out strike of nursing staff is highly unlikely—in fact the RCN constitution forbids such action (although the RCN is the smallest of the three unions, consisting of nurses only). Other ways of making a positive protest are being discussed. Nurses are sick and tired of low pay and inadequate working conditions.

In some cases, protests are already underway. Last year, for example, protests by over-worked staff led to one hospital in Lanarkshire turning away women seeking abortions. There simply was not the trained nursing staff available to cope with what the Health Board considered 'non-urgent work'.

Several mental hospitals,

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an unpopular field due to low pay and little job satisfaction, have experienced work-to-rules and overtime bans. 150 nurses at Fulbourn and Ida Darwin Hospitals in Cambridge recently voted to consider withdrawing their labour for a couple of hours each day if pay talks break down again.

Other action under discussion by nurses include refusing to admit non-emergency patients, refusing to nurse any private patients in NHS areas, and refusing to do non-nursing duties.

A more radical idea involved using the unions as an employment agency, by submitting mass resignations to the employer, then returning to work—but on an agency

basis, with a higher salary plus the agency administration fee.

A less direct approach put forward is to attract more men into the profession in the hope of encouraging a 'man's wage', something that current recruitment posters fail to do. Not surprisingly so when you consider advertisements usually appear in women's magazines and are aimed at young women. Imagine a poster with a boy holding a teddy in bandages... The fact that virtually no men are nurses has enabled employers to consistently

dressed as a nurse and another as a male attacker—was it really necessary?) claims that nurses are more at risk than any other group because of the unsociable hours they work and their low wage, which does not allow for taxis and so on. The campaign also hopes to persuade health authorities not to cut corners on security arrangements in hospital and nurses homes to save money.

At the end of the day, it is up to all of us—as potential patients as well as workers, and as women who have to bear the brunt of sickness in the rest of the family—to back the nurses, before the National Health Service falls apart. Wages and conditions in private health schemes are often so much better. Do we want a situation in which the nurses who care for the poor are overworked and underpaid, while the rich can afford proper levels of staffing?

Sandra Ryder

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Meanwhile, the RCN has launched a campaign against rape, highlighting that nursing is still women's work. An article in the RCN newspaper, the *Nursing Standard*, (complete with photos of a model

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WENDY WALLACE

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