

Nurses in Britain prepare for first strike in 106 years over pay



A protest by UK's NHS workers over pay and conditions in July 2021. (Via Getty Images)

London, November 30 (RHC)-- In their biggest-ever strike action, thousands of nurses in the United Kingdom are set to stage strikes on December 15th and 20th, joining other workers in the country who are taking industrial action over pay.

Nursing staff across the UK — including in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland but barring Scotland — will go on strike after the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union announced that the government had refused to meet demands for salary hikes of 5 percent above inflation. It would be the latest industrial action in Britain, where record-high inflation and life crises have prompted people to demand pay rises to keep pace with skyrocketing prices.

"Nursing staff have had enough of being taken for granted, enough of low pay and unsafe staffing levels, enough of not being able to give our patients the care they deserve," RCN General Secretary Pat Cullen said on Friday.

It follows the first of a series of two-day strikes by rail workers across the country, while postal workers will organize new stoppages ahead of Christmas. Many other UK public and private sector workers, from lawyers to airport ground staff, are set to join nationwide strikes this year.

The UK inflation rate has hit the highest figure for almost a decade, with surging energy prices believed to be driving that increase. Cullen said the salaries of nursing staff were so low that they cannot adequately provide medical and health services to patients.

The union, which wants a significant wage increase above the rate of inflation, announced earlier this month that more than 300,000 of its members had agreed to go on strike. Cullen said the government had turned down formal negotiations in the two weeks since the union first announced that nurses would go on strike. "Ministers have had more than two weeks since we confirmed that our members felt such injustice that they would strike for the first time," he said. "They have the power and the means to stop this by opening serious talks that address our dispute."

Inflation has soared in the UK amid a wave of nationwide strikes, hitting a four-decade high of 11.1 percent in October due to rising energy and food bills. The country's Central Bank- the Bank of England- is under pressure to increase the interest rate in response. But experts are divided over the impact of that or any other measure on the steep rise in the cost of living.

The strikes — unprecedented in the country's nursing union' history— are the first of several walkouts by National Health Service (NHS) nurses. According to NHS Providers, which represents hospital groups in England, one in four hospitals has set up a food bank to support staff. Last year, 25,000 nursing personnel withdrew from the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

Other UK health unions will join workers in industrial action, as ambulance workers in Scotland are set to go on strike on Monday. Across the economy as a whole, it looks like many sectors will continue to strike in the new year.

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