

Open Letter to Health Workers

Defend our Pay and Defend our NHS

Dear Health Worker

It's time to make a stand: to defend our pay – and to defend our NHS.

The Tory-led government is destroying the NHS. In England, the NHS faces spending cuts of £40 to £50 billion. This isn't scaremongering. This estimate comes from the Director General of Policy, Strategy and Finance at the Department of Health! Cuts of this size – over 40% of the budget – will end an NHS that meets people's day-to-day needs. Rationing of routine treatments like hip replacements and cataract surgery is already commonplace. Many District General Hospitals face closure (often by stealth, with the loss of A&E Departments set to pave the way for more cuts).

We're also seeing massive privatisation. Companies like Virgin, Serco, Sainsbury's and SpecSavers are gobbling up NHS services. Private companies are now 'advising' the new Clinical Commissioning Groups on how to privatise even more. We can't afford to wait until the next general election, because that will be too late. The NHS is melting away now.

Private companies need access to low paid health workers who do as they're told – that's where their profits come from. This is one of the reasons why the current attacks on our pay and working conditions are so dangerous. Any policy that cuts our pay, or that tries to drive a wedge between one group of health workers and another, helps to prepare the ground for more privatisation.

So what's happening to our pay?

In the South West, we've got a 'pay cartel' that's going for broke in a full-frontal attack on Agenda for Change, our national pay system. Quite rightly, unions and union activists are working hard to make sure this attack is stopped. It's incredibly important that we succeed in beating this.

Across the rest of England, we're now seeing the same process: a bit slower, but the identical logic of expecting health workers to pay for Tory cuts and privatisation.

We're NHS workers. We believe that if pay cuts, performance related pay and cuts in sick pay are wrong in the South West, they're wrong in every other region too. We absolutely reject the new plans from the NHS Employers to cut our pay, and to undermine the national 'Agenda for Change' pay system. We don't agree that it's OK for health workers to be paid less because of Tory spending cuts and privatisation. It's far too dangerous to accept Tory logic on this one. If we do, then every spending cut from the Tories – or every demand from big business to ramp up their profit margins – will simply ripple through the system and become another pay cut for us.

It's worth looking carefully at the detail of the NHS Employers' plans.

Performance related pay is going to apply to every single pay point of every single pay band – ending annual increments at a stroke. This paves the way for worse pay progression for 60% of health workers. We know that this is intended to save money – so it's very clear that lots of health workers who get an annual pay increment now won't get one in the future. All of the evidence is that performance related pay is discriminatory; another good reason for rejecting this. This is also particularly bad for the lowest paid NHS workers, who risk being trapped on some of the lowest salaries around. £14,153 for a fulltime job is an insult to any health worker.

The NHS Employers also want to cut our sick pay, holding this down to basic pay (and any high cost area supplement). Anyone who's off sick will lose unsocial hours payments, and very probably will also lose 'on

call' payments and RRP. This is a major attack, with sick pay cuts of a third for health workers with a high rate of unsocial hours working. We're likely to see a claim that the arrangements protect low paid workers – but this vicious cut in sick pay will apply to anyone earning more than £17,253 a year.

There are other problems too. Nursing, clinical, scientific and professional staff will lose 'preceptorship' payments– the opportunity to advance faster in the first two years at work in a job like nursing or physiotherapy. These health workers will end up stuck on £21,176 potentially for many years, because they'll face the new performance related pay arrangements. That's high enough to have student loan repayments deducted from your pay – but not that great for anyone trying to start a family or afford anywhere decent to live.

The proposals mean that 'workforce re-profiling' – i.e. constant re-organisation and downgrading – will become a way of life in the NHS. There's a suggestion that a reasonable amount of pay protection is 12 months for anyone with two years or more service with the local NHS organisation. This is far worse than most existing pay protection policies! It also penalises people who might have long service in the NHS, but who have moved from one Trust to another.

Other plans are to keep the top two pay points of higher bands (8c, 8d, 9; possibly 8b) as discretionary, awarded on a 12 month basis and then taken away again; and to introduce 'spot salaries' instead of Agenda for Change for senior staff. All of this contributes to the process of cutting pay and undermining our national pay system. And managers won't defend 'Agenda for Change' pay if they've already lost it.

There's an argument around that we have to agree these pay cuts because individual employers will introduce even bigger pay cuts if we don't. No – the answer to pay cuts has to be to organise and build a fightback. If we volunteer for pay cuts now, we can be sure that the NHS Employers will come back for more.

Agenda for Change is an important protection for all of us. At a time when Foundation Trusts are threatening to opt out, we need our unions to be working hard to defend Agenda for Change. There's nothing about the new plans that is in any way 'fair'. The new plans don't protect the low paid – they're bad for all health workers. There are no guarantees here on job security. The pay protection arrangements are appalling. The proposals certainly don't protect the NHS or patient care, because they pave the way for more cuts and more privatisation.

We oppose these proposals. They're bad for the NHS, and bad for NHS workers. There are important things that every health worker can do:

- Find out who represents you at the Staff Council, where pay cuts are being discussed – and make sure you tell them your views.
- If you're not already a union member, join today.
- If you are a union member, get active. Go to local meetings. Contact your local, regional and national reps and your Full Time Officers. Tell them to make sure they fight to protect your pay.

We're committed to defending the existing 'Agenda for Change' arrangements, and to building a real fight for fair pay for every health worker. We hope you'll join us in campaigning against the new pay proposals, and in the wider battles to stop the cuts and privatisation that are ripping our NHS apart.

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All signatories are in a personal capacity

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