

Nurses in UK to go on strike for first time in history

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London, November 11 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands of nurses in the United Kingdom will go on strike for the first time demanding better pay as the cost of living soars. Nurses at most of the state-run National Health Service (NHS) employers across the country have voted for the action, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) said on Wednesday.

The RCN, which has more than 300,000 members, said industrial action would begin before the end of the year, after the first vote on strike action in its 106-year-old history. "Anger has become action – our members are saying enough is enough," RCN General Secretary Pat Cullen said in a statement. "This

action will be as much for patients as it is for nurses. Standards are falling too low.”

NHS nurses have seen their salaries drop by up to 20 percent in real terms over the last 10 years, leaving members struggling to feed their families and pay their bills, the RCN has said. The union is asking for a pay rise of 5 percent above inflation.

NHS bosses said in September nurses were skipping meals to feed and clothe their children and were struggling to afford rising transport costs. One in four hospitals has set up food banks to support staff, according to NHS Providers, which represents hospital groups in England.

The UK has seen a wave of industrial unrest this year across industries from railways to the law as pay fails to keep up with inflation, running at 10 percent, and surging energy costs. The strike action threatens significant disruption to health system already strained by persistent government underinvestment, the COVID-19 pandemic and a severe shortage of staff.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s spokesperson told reporters earlier on Wednesday the government wanted to strike a balance between the “crucial role” played by nurses and the fiscal challenges facing the country.

But the RCN’s demands, which it estimates will cost 9 billion British pounds (\$10.25bn) would be “simply not deliverable,” the spokesperson said. They added that contingency plans are in place for any “staff impact”.

The NHS has provided free healthcare at the point of use since 1948 but is now dealing with a record seven million patients on waiting lists for hospital treatment. Accident and emergency departments are also under strain. “We are all hugely grateful for the hard work and dedication of NHS staff, including nurses, and deeply regret that some union members have voted for industrial action,” Health Minister Steve Barclay said.

Sunak is already under pressure on the issue since becoming prime minister two weeks ago when he was confronted by an elderly patient during a hospital visit who told him he needed to “try harder” on nurses’ pay.

The RCN’s Cullen called for “serious investment” from the government as it prepares to announce a budget next week aimed at repairing the nation’s finances, which were stretched by the pandemic and severely undermined by a “mini-budget” that included tax cuts for the wealthiest by Sunak’s predecessor, Liz Truss.

The RCN says there are a record number of vacancies in nursing with 25,000 staff having left the profession in the last year.

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