

Medics walk out in UK's biggest health service strikes

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Nurses and ambulance staff on Monday staged Britain's biggest round yet of health service strikes, stepping up their demands for better pay to combat a cost-of-living crisis.

The stoppages—part of a wave of industrial action across the UK economy—saw nurses and paramedics go on strike on the same day for the first time.

Striking staff outside St Thomas' Hospital in central London waved placards and chanted "Safer staffing saves lives" and "Claps don't pay the bills"—a reference to the daily national applause they received from the public during the coronavirus pandemic.

The healthcare workers say their wages have failed to keep up with inflation over the past decade, leaving them unable to pay their bills amid spiralling fuel, food and housing costs.

They warn that qualified nurses are quitting in droves due to the financial pressures, resulting in understaffing that endangers patient care.

"We're run off our feet 24/7, breaking our backs doing the jobs of three people," said trainee nursing associate Victoria Busk, who works on a trauma ward at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, central England.

"We're already on our knees. It's only going to get worse because more and more people will leave the profession," she said.

Last week, half a million people including teachers, transport workers

and Border Force staff at UK air and seaports also walked out over pay.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) union has said Monday's strike affects nurses in around a third of hospital trusts in England and most of Wales.

'Work for peanuts'

The ambulance staff strike only affects England, however, after paramedics in Wales called off their planned action following an improved pay offer.

"Every time you go on a shift, it's dangerous due to low staffing," said Angela Unufe on a picket line outside the Queen's Medical Centre in Nottingham, also in central England.

The former nurse with the state-funded National Health Service now works as a ward manager at a private mental health clinic.

"We need to create an atmosphere where nurses are supported. We are not supported right now.

"It's got to a situation where as managers we have to fill in for nurses who are not on shift, because we can't get the nurses because there are no nurses there, as no one wants to work for peanuts," she said.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called for pay rises to be "reasonable" and "affordable", warning that big pay awards will jeopardise attempts to tame inflation.

Health Secretary Steve Barclay had urged unions to call off Monday's action.

He cautioned that the Bank of England had warned that if we "try to beat inflation with high pay rises, it will only get worse and people would not be better off".

Speaking on a visit to a hospital in southwest London, Barclay said the strikes had led to the cancellation Monday of about 80,000 appointments and 11,000 in-patient operations, "so there is an impact on patients".

But opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer said the onus lay on the government to negotiate a way out.

"The widespread strikes today are a badge of shame for the government," he said.

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