

Britain's pseudo-left oppose worker rebellion against Royal College of Nurses leadership

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An overwhelming vote of no confidence has forced the council of the Royal College of Nurses (RCN) to step down. The response of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to this extraordinary event has exposed them as cynical lackeys of the union bureaucracy.

In March, the RCN leadership, along with 13 of the 14 health unions, agreed on a sell-out contract while hailing it as the “best deal in eight years.” This fraud was exposed as soon as workers received pay packets with rises as low as 12 pence.

After more than 1,000 health workers signed a petition, an Emergency General Meeting (EGM) was scheduled for September 28. To head off the growing rebellion, RCN General Secretary Janet Davies resigned. An independent review found that there was a “conflict of interest,” with the lead negotiator of the union biased in favour of the deal. At the EGM, the no-confidence vote was passed with overwhelming backing. The RCN is now promising an orderly transition, with elections for a new council to take office in January.

The SWP buried news of the no-confidence vote. Its *Socialist Worker* published an article on October 2, just 233 words in length, unannounced and attached to the bottom of another on the role of Fujitsu in the privatisation of the National Health Service.

The central thrust of the article was the insistence by “Andy,” described as an “RCN member in east London,” that “we have to be careful not to make this just about getting a new left-wing leadership at the top of the union. The key thing is pushing to reopen the pay deal.”

The article concluded with the appeal, “Activists in Unison, Unite and the GMB should use the RCN vote to pressure their union leaders to work together to reopen the pay deal.”

The message could not be clearer. No move against the union bureaucracy. Just put pressure on them to reopen

the rotten pay deal they agreed to just six months ago.

The Socialist Party did not even report on the EGM. The last article on the subject in the *Socialist* was published August 8, which acknowledged, “Trust in the union leaderships is at an all-time low...there have been countless nurses ripping up their lifetime union memberships in complete anger at the role played by the leaders.”

This raised “[t]he prospect of a new generation of NHS staff thrust into action by this debacle” that “could signify a new layer of activists who can dislodge the right-wing leaderships of the main health unions and offer a genuine fighting lead on pay and the wider issues facing our NHS.”

What the SP means is a “new layer” of bureaucrats to stream money toward its own party coffers and to provide a facelift for the union. It intends no genuine struggle.

“The unions should give a lead [i.e. the same unions who sold out in the first place] to NHS staff and reopen the talks to pressure this weak Tory government into real pay rises for hard working staff,” the *Socialist* writes.

Both parties are acutely aware that events in the RCN are only one example of a growing opposition to the decades of betrayals by the trade union bureaucracy. In 2016, the British Medical Association isolated and inflicted a defeat on strikes by junior doctors against inferior contracts. This year, the University College Union (UCU) shut down the struggle of its 50,000 lecturers against the attack on their pensions. On October 18, the UCU will hold a recall conference after its June conference was closed early because, faced with motions calling for her resignation, General Secretary Sally Hunt and her supporters repeatedly walked out to prevent them being heard.

This rebellion, which finds expression in education strikes and the rejection of sell-out contracts by UPS workers in the US and similar developments

internationally, prompted a discussion within the pages of the SWP's *International Socialism*.

Long-time member Mark O'Brien warned that "the frustration within the working class as potential struggles are suppressed is cumulative and real. If this frustration is not expressed in official union actions, it will find other outlets." He cautioned his fellow members, "The danger is that we become bureaucratized ourselves, and locked into positions and organisational processes that will block our ability to relate to breaks when they occur." He tentatively suggested building "horizontal networks" and conducting "socialist propaganda" in the unions.

This is closing the political stable door long after the SWP horse has bolted, given the prominent role occupied by its members within the apparatus of the UCU and other unions. Tom Machell was assigned to respond to O'Brien's article, warning him that such views were "extremely dangerous."

For its part, the Socialist Party has recently suffered a split, after one of its most high-profile leaders, Janice Godrich, president of the Public and Commercial Service (PCS) union, did a deal with PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka to stand against another member, Chris Baugh, who is currently serving as PCS assistant general secretary. Godrich's career prospects have benefited from years in which the SP has worked to either conceal or apologise for the PCS's betrayals of its members. When Baugh belatedly made minor face-saving criticisms, he was replaced in Serwotka's affections by someone more malleable still. Godrich now sits on the general council of the Trades Union Congress and the SP is desperately seeking to resume normal services.

The SWP and SP both speak of "mobilising the rank-and-file" to describe various "broad left" formations dominated by left-talkers such as themselves. What this "rank-and-file" activity consists of is the pseudo-left groups policing disaffected union members on behalf of the bureaucracy.

The union leaders are generally grateful for such efforts. Despite its fallout with Serwotka, the SP's National Shop Stewards Network held a rally in September, to coincide with the TUC congress. Speakers included the leader of the Unite union, Len McCluskey, and Mick Cash of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. The SP crowed, "Praise for the role played by the NSSN in building solidarity and support for workers in struggle was on tap throughout the speeches. This included Unite the Union general secretary Len McCluskey who made a surprise visit and gave an impromptu speech."

Other leading bureaucrats in attendance were Bakers and Allied Food Workers Union General Secretary Ronnie Draper, Communication Workers Union Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger, and Unite's Assistant General Secretary Howard Beckett. They were joined by the unfortunate Mr. Baugh and another of the party's leading bureaucrats, Amy Murphy, president of the retail workers' union, USDAW.

The Socialist Equality Party and NHS FightBack lent full support to the demand for the removal of the RCN leadership. But we opposed that a change of leadership would transform the RCN or any other union so deeply embedded into the structures of management and the state apparatus into the type of "fighting union" cited by the SP and SWP to conceal their slavish support for the bureaucracy. An SEP statement circulated to the EGM insisted, "Today's resolution reveals the growing anger and a determination to fight among workers, but this opposition must be organised. The next step must be the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the RCN and other health unions, to launch a united struggle with all workers in the NHS and throughout the public sector."

The movements under way in the RCN and UCU against the union leaderships are markers of future developments. The building of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods will provide the means for taking this struggle forward and mounting a counter-offensive against the corporations, the Conservative government and Labour, Tory, Scottish Nationalist Party, and Liberal Democrat local authorities in defence of jobs, wages, and essential social services.



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