

English health workers in first strike for 32 years

October 13 2014, by Edouard Guihaire

Workers in England's state-run National Health Service go on strike on Monday for the first time since 1982 following a government refusal to hike their pay.

NHS staff including nurses, ambulance crews and midwives plan to stop working between 7:00 am and 11:00 am (0600 GMT and 1000 GMT).

The move is intended to pile pressure on Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who rejected the recommendations of an independent panel for a one-percent wage increase for all [health](#) service staff.

The recommendations, Hunt said back in March, "on top of automatic increments, are unaffordable and would risk the quality of patient care".

Created in 1948 and paid for through taxation, the NHS provides universal healthcare free at the point of delivery.

"Our first priority must be to ensure that the NHS can afford to employ the right number of frontline staff needed to ensure the safe, effective and compassionate care that patients have a right to expect," Hunt said.

The Conservative-Liberal coalition government has roughly halved Britain's budget deficit from 11 percent since taking office in 2010.

But the continued belt-tightening has been criticised by [trade unions](#), citing the health of the British economy, which is expected to grow by

three percent in 2014.

Unions say 'Enough's enough'

"Inflation has continued to rise since 2011 and the value of NHS pay has fallen by around 12 percent," said Dave Prentis, leader of Unison, Britain's biggest public sector trade union.

Refusing to increase NHS pay by "even a paltry one percent shows what the government really thinks about its [health workers](#)".

Among the unions taking industrial action, the Royal College of Midwives is going on strike for the first time in its 133-year existence.

"After years of stress, pressure and overwork, being told they face another year of rising bills but static pay is just too much. They have said enough's enough," Jon Skewes, the RCM's director for employment relations, told AFP.

Hunt shows no sign of changing his mind.

However, a Department of Health spokesman said: "We remain keen to meet with the unions to discuss how we can work together to make the NHS pay system fairer."

Only the Chinese army, the Indian railways and US supermarket chain Wal-Mart have more employees than the NHS, according to the British government.

The nine unions participating in the strike count more than 400,000 members of the English NHS' 1.3 million staff, but not all of them will be staying away from work, the BBC said.

Emergency services, notably, will continue but unions are recommending patients defer their appointments.

At the Great Western Hospital in Swindon, southwest England, measures have been put in place to ensure "any disruption to patients is kept to a minimum", said Oonagh Fitzgerald, the director of workforce and education at the health trust running the facility.

"The strike action will not affect patients who need emergency treatment."

NHS an election battleground

The strike comes seven months ahead of the May 2015 general election, and the opposition Labour Party is putting the NHS at the heart of its campaign pitch.

It accuses the Conservatives of planning to dismantle the health service by running it down and selling it off.

Prime Minister David Cameron has accused Labour of spreading "complete and utter lies" about their intentions, saying: "how dare they frighten those who are relying on the NHS".

Kristian Niemietz, a senior research fellow at the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs said the NHS would "always be a key election topic", but predicted a "very shallow debate".

"The only politically palatable statements on the NHS are to shower it with praise, and to promise to spend more money on it," he said.

He said British health workers were "not underpaid" compared to other countries and while pay rates have stagnated, "the same is true for most

sectors of the economy" during what has been a prolonged slump and slow recovery.

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Citation: English health workers in first strike for 32 years (2014, October 13) retrieved 2 February 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-english-health-workers-years.html>

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