



# Red Pill

A Workers' Liberty healthworkers' bulletin

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## Reclaim the right to strike!

**Most Unison members in the NHS will be on strike today. However, a small minority of branches, mostly in the London region, are telling their members to go into work. In some areas, over 70% of Unison members have been told they are exempt from the strike and should go into work as normal.**

When healthworkers strike, the aim is to provide a bank holiday level of service. However, there are very different understandings across the union about how to achieve this goal. The overwhelming majority of Unison branches are calling for ALL their members to strike and have issued exemptions in only a small number of cases. They expect non-union members and management to cover the shifts on the wards and emergency services.

Most union members work on a 24/7 shift pattern and so would normally work on bank holidays. By calling these members out on strike, they create a staffing vacuum on the wards that must be covered by managers and non-union members.

However, a small minority of branches have done a deal with management to exempt ALL their members who are on the 24/7 rotation. The problem is that the majority of union members in health are frontline staff. In these areas, unless the pickets manage to recruit thousands of managers and admin staff to the union today, it means that a tiny proportion of the workforce is eligible to strike.

### **COLLUDING WITH MANAGEMENT**

**These renegade branches are making a mockery of the exemptions policy. In Unison, unelected regional officers were supposed to ensure that a consistent policy on exemptions was carried throughout the union. It now appears that these branch officers and certain regional officers have colluded with management behind the backs of the union membership to minimise the effect of the strike.**

Healthworkers who are subject to these blanket bans should be clear: **THERE IS A LEGAL RIGHT TO TAKE STRIKE ACTION.** The NMC has stated that healthworkers have a legal right to strike and it is management's responsibility to ensure safe cover in life and limb services. We must utilise this right in order for our strike to be effective. If healthworkers do not go into work today, then non-union members will have to cover their shifts. We should not be offering any exemptions until all the offices and non-emergency services are shut down for the day.

We obviously need to ensure that there is the right ratio of qualified and unqualified nursing staff. But many senior managers are registered nurses and all members of staff who have done mandatory training could work a shift as a nursing assistant.

The only duty in our code of conduct is that we give these people a decent handover. We want to create a situation where admin and senior managers have a choice to make – either join the union and take action or work a shift on the ward. If we are successful in building the strike action and management are really struggling to find staff to cover the shifts, then we can consider organising exemptions.

### **INCONSISTENCY**

**We demand that the union nationally carries out an audit into how branches have organised for life-and-limb cover. We demand an investigation into why there is such inconsistency across the union.**

We want to know who sanctioned the blanket exemptions and what their reasons were for breaking with the approach followed in the rest of the union. We need a national policy on emergency cover. We cannot leave these decisions to the whims of unaccountable regional officials who may be pursuing their own agendas.

Lastly, it is important to remember why we are on strike today. The government are looking to smash up our pensions en route to full blown privatisation of the NHS. They are already threatening more anti-trade union laws and attacks on our pay. It is not a time for closing our eyes and hoping it will all go away. **Nor is it a time for trying to maintain cosy relationships with management. It is a time for individuals to step up, to get involved in trade unions and to rebuild a movement capable of stopping them. There is no place in our movement for those who attempt to undermine our struggle.**

Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation active in the British labour movement fighting for an alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership, democracy and workers' control. Red Pill is produced by our members who work in the health service. To get involved with producing the bulletin, or to take copies for your workplace, email [awl@workersliberty.org](mailto:awl@workersliberty.org) with the subject line 'Red Pill'.