

# RCN backs industrial action

## "Moderates" turn militant

By Gerry Bates

THE DECISION of the conference of the normally quiet Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to ballot its members on abandoning its ban on industrial action marks an important development not just for nurses but for the anti-Tory fightback as a whole.

Public service workers are growing increasingly bitter, frustrated and angry.

That even an organisation like the RCN, which grew by 250% in the eighties by competing with the TUC health unions NUPE and COHSE to win nurses opposed to industrial action finds itself propelled into confrontation with the Tory government shows just how desperate the situation has become in the Health Service.

The immediate spark has been the Tories' insulting 1% pay offer, but the message from delegates at the RCN's conference was that nurses have just had enough.

Unfortunately, the leadership of the RCN, including the general secretary, former health manager Christine Hancock, seem determined to use the vote not as a prelude to real action against the Tories but merely as a means to prise some very meagre concessions from local Trust bosses.

The RCN leaders aim to get a "critical mass" of some 60% of Trusts to offer a local deal of 3%.

The problem with this strategy is that it undermines the basis of an effective fightback: national action. It leaves nurses isolated in the face of local management demands for people to give up bank holidays and take less days off sick in return for 3%.

Unfortunately UNISON, the TUC affiliated health union, has not been setting a different agenda.

## Take Action!

### Affiliate to the Welfare State Network!

The Welfare State Network was launched in September 1994 by the Socialist Movement Trade Union Committee and the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs. It aims to build a national movement to defend services, benefits, and public sector jobs. It publishes a newspaper *Action for Health and Welfare*

- Affiliation is £25 for unions and Labour Parties and £10 for unemployed/pensioners groups
- Individual subscriptions £5 or £3 (unwaged)
- Affiliates receive 10 copies of *Action*

Write to WSN, c/o Southwark TUSU, 42 Braganza Street, London SE17



### What will happen if a Trust sacks a nurse for refusing to cooperate with administrative duties?

There are several reasons for this:

- The general passivity and lack of drive of the union bureaucracy, who have been arguing for people to wait for a Labour government for the last 13 years, since the 1982 pay dispute.

- The changes in the NHS which have seen the traditional base of the main nursing union COHSE — now part of UNISON — decline. The old mental hospitals have been closed, with COHSE's nursing activists dispersed. UNISON's real base in the health sector is very weak. The response to the sign-up campaign was poor and in some areas membership has fallen quite drastically.

UNISON officials now claim that the union can't have an effective national strike ballot because it hasn't got an accurate national list of its health worker members. And those members they add, are employed by lots of different trusts anyway and so legally can't strike together.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to get a united fightback going in the NHS.

UNISON should call a day of action with a national march in London. This should be followed with a ballot for a series of strikes with emergency cover.

If this was done with some seriousness, then would Trust bosses or the Tories use the law? Probably not. Look at the government's unpopularity. Look at the RCN

conference vote and the similar decision by the Royal College of Midwives.

If national action by UNISON were linked to a serious attempt to organise effective non-cooperation with management alongside RCN, then the dispute could be transformed from a political embarrassment for the Tories into a very serious victory for our side.

Despite the contradictions in the RCN's line that they will take action by administrative non-cooperation, but not strike — for instance, what will they do to defend a nurse sacked for non-cooperation? — it does show that broader and broader layers of the population are turning against the Tories and their brutal free-market barbarism.

Maybe the RCN is going through a similar process to that which saw NALGO transformed from a tame, no-strike, staff association into a general trade union within a generation. This is paralleled in the finance sector by the decision of the Barclay's staff association UNIFI to organise a strike for the first time ever.

Even if the RCN goes no further than it has already done, the fact is that when the RCN votes for industrial action while Tony Blair tours the land re-assuring the bosses that there will be "no return to the seventies" things are not as bad for socialists as the media would like us to believe. ■