

## **Midwives' working conditions are mothers' birthing conditions**

The Royal College of Midwives have voted to take strike action for the first time ever in their 133 year history. In real terms if pay had increased in line with inflation over the last 5 years, a band 6 midwife would be £6,000 pounds a year better off today. Even the 1% pay rise is an effective pay cut in real terms. This strike is vital and necessary to stem the torrent of attacks on our living standards.

We all know our pay is rubbish considering the work we do. We know that the rich are getting richer, that inequality is widening, that the UK is one of the most unequal societies in Europe. The surprise is that we are not all taking the streets this very moment.

### **Special job: Special exploitation**

The view of midwifery as a 'calling', a 'privilege', 'the best job in the world', is fine if it helps you feel happy in your work; but turns into a weapon against us when we demand a decent pay and decent working conditions. "How can you complain? You really do it for love, and the pay is an extra." There is a sense with much of 'women's work' from mothers to nurses to childminders that we embody the role itself, and would do it for free (and we often do). Midwives doubly so, as it is women doing work for other women.

The exhaustion, the fear of disciplinary action or litigation, and

the gap between how we want to practise and how we have to, makes the job almost unbearable for some, or for others makes them become hard-shelled to deal with it. We know this affects not only ourselves, but the women too. We know that we don't give our best to women when the wards are understaffed with little time for breastfeeding support, ante-natal care, or even finishing the essential work and completing notes in a shift.

### **Crisis? What crisis?**

But look at it another way: There is a living planet, lots of people, lots of resources, lots of knowledge. We have the ability to communicate, to plan, to work together. If we, the people, were prioritising human need there would be no crisis. The unconditional love that can be in a birth room gives us a glimpse of a better world. In the way a mother cares for her baby, and the way the baby knows it needs to be close to its mum; in the gentle care of dad and grandmas for the mother/baby dyad...

There is money for war (58 billion); money to increase MPs pay by 11%; money for the unpopular HS2 train; money for NHS senior managers bonuses (166 million). 'Austerity' is a political choice made by politicians, not a necessity. This 'crisis' is only a crisis for the capitalists as they find it harder to make huge profits without us fighting back. The constant expansion necessary for capitalism to work well is getting harder to maintain, and more damaging for the planet. To sustain the same level of

profit they have to exploit workers and the planet more and more harshly. This endless search for profit has led to the impending sell-off of the NHS to private firms who have profit as their explicit motive. Pension changes have already forced us to pay more and work longer to get less. Governments will soon be coming after incremental pay - claiming that experience has no value, their aim is to drive down wages further. These are all just ways they are clawing back pennies from working people to bolster their profits.

### **Midwives and Mothers in Solidarity**

Midwives are often the defenders of women's bodies, of women's knowledge of themselves. Against a barrage of medicalisation, taylorisation, mistrust and disgust of women's bodies; we are always and clearly - on the side of the woman. So to go forward in struggle, we must struggle together with women - and be able to communicate with them about that.

Don't feel apologetic about the service suffering in a strike - but see it as a strike for all women and midwives together. All those with an interest in good maternity care need to know we are taking this action for everyone. Midwives are caught in the care and emergency workers trap: we do care, we do want to do our best - but the conditions are not letting us. To continue work under these conditions is to let ourselves and our women down - much more than a few days of industrial action

will. In Berlin, Germany recently there was a wave of staged strikes in a hospital and through explaining and getting the patients on board, they were supportive of the strike and accepted the disruption to their care.

We are also struggling to protect the areas of midwifery still not completely consumed by the medical model. The struggle of the independent midwives who preserve the skills of home births, breach births, physiological 3rd stages. The struggle to defend women's right to choose their birth. These are all fights for both midwives and women.

### **Let October the 13th be the start of something big**

Across the NHS and in the private care sector workers are facing the same attacks - and are fighting back. These co-ordinated strikes can be a great start for a common struggle. The domestic staff, the HCAs, the porters - we are all essential for a well-run environment and need to support each other's struggles - not to allow ourselves to be divided by the formal hierarchies and divisions imposed upon us in the NHS. We need to see this strike as the first step to a unifying together - with other NHS workers, with all other workers, and with mothers. We need to make those links across society - to support the growing groundswell of anger and start a process of real social change towards a society based on need, not profit.

## Mumsnet responses to the question:

*Would you support a midwives strike?*

*“ yes, of course i would. What else can they do? what other power do they have except their labour?? If we need nurses and midwives so much that we couldn't cope with them striking, then why are they getting what is in effect another pay cut. Pay them properly*

*“ I support the right to strike and I am horrified by what this govt is doing to NHS staff. The idea of a midwife strike is very frightening - what would happen to women giving birth? I would hold the govt responsible and not blame midwives for doing this but on a personal level, I would be very afraid if it happened - this is because I value midwives so much and wish they were decently treated and rewarded for what they do.*

*“ Absolute support. Please do strike. The maternity services have been utterly destroyed. What else can we do?*

*“ I would support a strike. If all else has failed, the only thing left is your labour. You are key workers. You should be paid a wage that reflects inflation and offers financial stability. You provide a service to the country and should be remunerated accordingly.*

In response to another post: 'Sorry but patients come first':

*“ Yeah they do, but I think people expect us to be martyrs. If it carries on there will be no patients because there won't be nurses there to look after them. People are leaving in droves.*

*“ And people with the opinion of 'we don't get a pay rise why should you', well why don't you make your own thread, propose your own strike and get off our backs about wanting fair pay for working in terrible conditions. I've fainted on occasion because I hadn't had a break or a drink or food. I've nearly wet myself because I couldn't go to the toilet. It's not just a difficult and stressful job it's bloody undignified.*



# Where would they be without us?

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## Midwives on Strike So we stay in the picture

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### Get in contact

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