

People's Covid Inquiry February-June 2021

**Witness statement
Rehana Azam, National Secretary GMB**

Session 3 24 March 2021

DID THE GOVERNMENT ADOPT THE RIGHT PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGY?

Amid increasing criticism of the UK Government for its handling of the pandemic and parallel calls from civil society for the adoption of a 'Zero Covid' strategy, our inquiry asks: what does 'Zero Covid' mean and is it possible, or has the Government really done the best it can? Is it possible to protect the population and protect the economy at the same time? Did the prospect of an effective vaccine side-line effective test, trace and isolate? Established public health measures – including door to door contact work – were used in other countries, but by and large bypassed in England. Keyworkers continuing to work in coronavirus environments, and low paid workers not supported to isolate when required, were not afforded protection.

Inquiry process

We will look at the UK government's engagement with local government public health teams, primary care GP teams and the NHS and ask if this has been effective. Under the scope will be decisions of government to privatise testing and contact tracing, their response to calls for 'Find, Test, Trace, Isolate and Support' (FTTIS), their sharing of data and decision making with local government; the financial support for central v. local contact tracing and performance of these; abolition of Public Health England and the level of public health expertise that they relied on in their decision making.

STATEMENT

I (name) **Rehana Azam**

Job title/ role/ occupation: **GMB National Secretary**

will say as follows: _____

1. I make this statement for the purposes of the People's Covid Inquiry, which is to be held on 24 March.
2. I am able to attend and give evidence. If unable to attend, I agree to my statement being considered by the Inquiry.

3. What is your job/ role/ occupation – how long doing this for/ brief summary of background/ experience - if possible, attach CV to statement

GMB National Secretary. Head of Public Services (5 years)

Prior to this, National Officer for NHS (4 Years).

Worked for GMB for 23 years.

GMB is the third largest trade union and over half of our membership is in public services.

4. What is your connection/ interest/ background/ experience relevant to the pandemic in England?

GMB represents workers across every Government department, including the NHS and social care.

GMB has been at the forefront in challenging Government and employers across the public sector and including the NHS, to build safe systems of work for our members.

I have also been the leading GMB's industrial response to Covid-19 across manufacturing, commercial services and public services.

I am a member of the TUC Race Taskforce Group that has been set up in the pandemic to look at the impacts of Covid-19 across Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic communities and I am currently Chairing the TUC Public Policy Group.

5. How are you able to assist the Inquiry – what is your expertise/ knowledge/ specialism?

As a trade union official, I represent hundreds of thousands of workers, many of whom are classed as key workers and have worked throughout the pandemic. My particular expertise lies in worker safety and representation.

6. What in your view were the original vision and principles underpinning the NHS?

The great Bevan who created our NHS principles of a national health service, accessible to all, free at the point of delivery, are very much the principles of my campaigning efforts throughout the past decade.

Please briefly outline your testimony below or attach or reference an article which will provide the panel with relevant information.

3.11: What impact has Government public health strategy had in the pandemic on frontline and low paid workers and what is needed to reduce these risks?

General Remarks:

- Government weren't prepared for this pandemic despite the Government being warned years earlier of this fact. There weren't the required response procedures in place to deal with it. There were no PPE supplies.
- There were over 100,000 vacancies in our NHS and over 110,000 vacancies in social care before the pandemic. Years of underfunding and undervaluing these workers before the pandemic had led to chronic staffing shortages and a workforce and system already at breaking point.
- This is why GMB is campaigning for pay justice across all public services and in the NHS, a restorative pay award of 15%.
- All devolved countries have recognised the efforts of their health and social care workers with financial bonus payments. England has chosen not to.
- We have had to fight for migrant workers and government u-turns on health surcharges and immigration visas. We have just submitted evidence into the ECHR which is specific to racism and racial inequality across the NHS and social care.
- Government got its priorities all wrong.
- The pandemic has highlighted how underinvested the public health sector is. Cuts to HSE funding meant they couldn't respond efficiently. PHE cuts over years meant there was a loss of skills when needed the most. Government have now transferred PHE responsibilities to a new organisation - National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP), being headed up by Dido Harding.
- Dido Harding, the person in charge of the failed test, track and trace programme. A programme that wasn't quick enough to roll out mass testing and wasn't able to contact enough people and advise them to isolate. An example of what happens when you give responsibility for public health to the private sector rather than local public health teams.
- The success of the vaccine roll out needs to be applauded. But the government didn't do this - our NHS did.

Govt public health strategy impact on frontline and low paid workers

- I have led the GMB industrial response to Covid across public services, manufacturing and commercial services. We had to fight from the start, and every step of the way, to protect our members.
- The government have absolutely failed at every test in protecting workers and the wider public.

- GMB campaigned for a People's Bail Out - Guarantee Wages; Protect People; and Save Lives.
- We had to fight for sick pay, PPE, testing, furlough, etc.
- We worked with government departments and employers to ensure workers were protected. A key principle was to ensure that workers could self isolate and not lose pay.
- SSP puts workers in the unbearable dilemma of having to choose between going to work ill and potentially endangering their colleagues, and those they care for, or stay at home and not be able to put food on the table. This issue wasn't addressed swiftly enough - these key workers should never have been put into the position they were of choosing whether to put themselves and others in harm's way or staying home.
- We made a compelling argument to government regarding the 3 waiting days for SSP. We lobbied government, with the help of the Labour Party and made the case for sick pay from day one. We have spent the rest of the pandemic arguing for full and normal pay when on sick.
- We managed to protect pay in health and local government, but there are still some in social care and contractors that are only receiving SSP.
- We lobbied government for supplier relief for contractors so that they could pay their worker's full pay. We secured this at the start of the pandemic, but this funding has now ended and despite pressure from GMB, Government have refused to reinstate it. Workers have once again been left vulnerable. Government should step in and underwrite wages where employers can't.
- We successfully lobbied government for additional funding for social care to ensure these low paid, predominantly women workers, could access their normal pay should they need to isolate. We worked with care providers to assist them in accessing these infection prevention and control funds. But the system was that complicated that many chose to not to access it. Other care providers accessed it and chose not to spend it on sick pay.
- The care system is one that is so fragmented, it was simply not in a position to be able to respond quickly and effectively to a pandemic. The horrific death rates in care homes speak for themselves.
- We had to fight to get social care workers included in PHE PPE guidance at the start of the pandemic. GMB had care providers contacting us and begging for us to help them. They felt completely abandoned, with no clear guidance and no support, whilst their staff got ill and Covid tore through their homes, wiping out residents and workers in its path.
- PPE has been one of the most shocking failures of this government's handling of the pandemic and continues to be. Out of date, inferior quality, not fit for purpose, low supplies, money wasted and paid out to friends of the Government.

What is needed to reduce these risks?

- Full sick pay from day one for all workers. This should be underwritten by government where employers are unable to do it.
- Privatisation and disproportionate job segregation have impacted worse on women and black Asian and minority ethnic workers. We need true equality for all our workers.
- We need an end to privatisation and bring back in-house our public services. All this has brought is a hugely fragmented public sector with a race to the bottom for pay and terms and conditions.
- A recovery plan that is going to put the value of the workers at its heart. This includes proper pay, safe workplaces and time to rest and spend time with their families.
- GMB is campaigning for Covid to be classified as an industrial disease.
- GMB is calling for a fully independent public inquiry into covid and the governments handling of it.
- The government have lost their way. We need a coherent strategy with all key stakeholders at the table.
- We need covid legislation improved to protect key workers going forwards.
- Key worker status must be put into the immigration regulations.
- We want pay justice and a pay rise.
- We want KONP and the peoples covid inquiry to join our call for all NHS workers to get a 15% pay increase.

I confirm that the opinions I have expressed represent my true and complete professional opinions on the matters to which they refer.



20th March 2021

SIGNED

DATE

Please return to Inquiry@keepournhspublic.com

Thank you

Olivia O'Sullivan

Secretary to the panel

The People's Covid Inquiry

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