Thousands show their solidarity in the battle to save bursaries

By Chris Longhurst @news_rcni

Crowds of protesters who marched on Downing Street have vowed to escalate their campaign against the threat to bursaries by walking out for an hour during one of the forthcoming junior doctors’ strikes.

Similar simultaneous marches took place in Manchester, Middlesbrough and Newcastle on Saturday. The union Unite said up to 10,000 people took part in London, although police put the figure closer to 5,000.

Junior doctors marched alongside the nurses (pictured) in a show of solidarity. Co-organiser and final-year nursing student Danielle Tiplady urged students to stop work for an hour if a proposed doctors’ walkout goes ahead on February 10. She had vocal support from the crowd.

Health unions, including the RCN, Unison, Unite and the BMA were represented. RCN president Cecilia Anim, general secretary Janet Davies, and the chair of the college’s student council, Sylvia Duval, all took part.

Ms Davies took the microphone at the gates of Downing Street and spoke of how inspiring the passion and dedication on display had been. She vowed to fight ‘all the way’, adding: ‘My message to the government is: don’t dumb down our NHS, keep paying for the education of nurses and make sure we preserve nursing for the future.’

Ms Duval said afterwards: ‘Bursaries are an essential financial support and without them many of us here today wouldn’t be able to fulfil our dream of becoming a nurse.

‘Taking away these grants and replacing them with hefty loans will only pile on more personal financial pressure to an already overstretched part of the healthcare workforce.’

Anger has been growing since the chancellor George Osborne announced the government’s intention to replace the means-tested nursing bursary with a student loan from September 2017.

The government claims loans, along with the removal of limits on the number of training places, will allow an extra 10,000 nurses to train in the next five years. Opponents say it will mean nursing students graduating with debts of up to £60,000. A petition set up by nursing student Kat Barber and signed by more than 150,000 people was due to be debated by MPs on Monday.

‘Ministers should make it easier to become a nurse, not harder’

Danielle Jenkins, mental health nursing student, Anglia Ruskin, Cambridge: ‘I could not have done this course without the bursary. One of my children was born during my training, and it is vitally important this support continues. You don’t get paid for the time you are on placement and now they expect us to pay to be there. It shows George Osborne’s lack of understanding.’

Helen Corry, second-year, adult nursing student, King’s College London: ‘The government is making it harder to become a nurse at a time when the profession is in crisis and it should be doing all it can to make it easier. I challenge Jeremy Hunt and George Osborne to spend just one day on placement with us and see if they still want to do this to us by the end.’

Renée Barrett, post-graduate children’s nursing student, King’s College London: ‘There has been a massive recruitment drive to get nurses from overseas because we don’t have enough. Jeremy Hunt is destroying the profession by making it not worth the effort to join. Nursing is not the best career financially; we do it because we love it. We don’t want to stop doing the thing we love.’