

UK: Demonstration in Leeds oppose attacks on the National Health Service

By our reporters
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Over 1,500 people demonstrated in Leeds, England on Saturday in defence of the NHS. The protest was called by the Health Campaigns Together coalition with the backing of regional trade unions, Labour Party branches, the Green Party and pseudo-left groups.

Health workers from throughout the region as well as members of the public, who are being massively affected by the cuts and privatisation of the NHS, attended. A sizable number at the demonstration are involved in some of the many local campaigns to oppose privatisation and cuts in hospitals throughout the Yorkshire region. Among these were protesters opposing the planned closure of overnight accident and emergency facilities in Huddersfield Royal Infirmary (HRI), Stafford and Grantham hospitals.

Other campaigns represented were those from Barnsley, who are opposing the shifting of some procedures, including paediatric surgery, to Sheffield Children's Hospital and stroke patients to Sheffield Teaching Hospitals.

Many of those marching carried placards opposing the Conservative government's Sustainability and Transformation Plans [STPs], which are being rolled across 44 areas around England, including Yorkshire. Under the STPs, fully £26 billion of vital facilities and resources will be removed from the NHS by 2021. Among the placards were slogans reading "Stop STPs!" or slogans using the STP acronym to read "Slash-Trash-Privatise." Others read "Save the NHS" and "!Emergency! !Emergency! !Emergency!"

Many had homemade banners, with one reading, "Cut to the Bone" showing a skeleton. Another read, "Don't Spend Our Tax on War! Keep Our Children Safe."

The march was supported by a number of Deliveroo workers—who deliver food from restaurants and

takeaways on bicycles. They recently held their own protests against the sacking of some of their co-workers.

At the rally held outside Leeds Art Gallery following the march, speakers from the trade unions and Labour Party offered nothing but platitudes to assembled protesters, fraudulently claiming these organisations were taking up a fight to defend the National Health Service.

Keith Venables, the national co-chair of the Keep Our NHS Public campaign, began his contribution with the chant, "Whose NHS? – eliciting the response from the crowd of "Our NHS." Referring to the March 4 London demonstration, at which up to 250,000 people demonstrated in defence of the NHS, he said, "We can organise and we can win... this is an amazing protest and we know that we need more than a protest." However, those attending were advised to do so only under the leadership of the trade unions and Labour. "We need coordination across the country involving local unions, national unions, campaigners, patients, activists and every single activist group we can get involved."

The second speaker, Mike Forster, was introduced as from the campaign to keep open the A&E unit at Huddersfield Royal Infirmary. Forster is a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party and echoed the remarks of Venables, with calls for bigger demonstrations and for everyone to support "a summer of love for the National Health Service." Posing the question, "Were we just letting off steam? [at the London demonstration] No... this is just the beginning of a mass movement... there will be big demonstrations all over the country."

Sowing illusions that the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party could be pressured to act in defence of

the NHS, Forster said, “It’s time that the TUC and the Labour Party got their act together and put their resources in and called out millions of people in the autumn in the second big national demo to save our NHS.”

The political perspective advanced by Venables and Forster serves as a political amnesty for the unions and Labour, who as events have demonstrated over the past seven years, are opposed to any struggle to mobilise their membership and vast resources in opposition to the Tories’ destruction of the NHS.

Tony Pearson—Regional Head of Health in Yorkshire and Humberside for the Unison public sector trade union—spoke for the trade union bureaucracy, which has allowed massive attacks on its members’ conditions, including the 500,000 who are employed in the NHS.

Pearson referred to the struggle of care workers in Doncaster in 2014—where staff were transferred from the NHS to a private care company, Care UK, with a resulting massive cut in pay. He said, “We saw a few years ago in Doncaster vicious attacks on the pay of our members, who help people with extreme mental health disabilities live from day to day. We saw their pay slashed by £6,000 a year.” Pearson’s words in fact condemned the trade unions.

The unions’ refusal to mobilise the mass opposition that exists to the gutting of the NHS has led to a situation where workers such as those in Doncaster—who are members of Unison—have suffered enormous attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

The final speaker was Tracy Brabin, Labour MP for the Spenningsdale and Batley constituency, the replacement for previous Labour MP Jo Cox, who was murdered by a fascist during last year’s Brexit referendum campaign. Brabin called on protesters to place their trust in a future Labour government. She said, “We are the labour movement. We stand together for workers and we stand together for our National Health Service. Nye Bevan [the Labour MP who inaugurated the NHS in 1948] said the NHS will last as long as there are folk with the faith to fight for it. Well, we have faith, we will continue the fight because we built the NHS. We invested in the NHS and when we take government again we will save the NHS.”

No mention was made of the last Labour governments led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In

office from 1997 until 2010, Labour laid the groundwork for the destruction of the NHS by the widespread use of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). PFI was first introduced by the Tories as a means of transferring wide areas of the public sector over to private corporations.

Nor did anyone on the platform mention the struggle last year by 50,000 junior doctors, who waged a bitter fight against a rotten contract imposing seven-day working, with no additional funding. The junior doctors were defeated, with the contract agreed to by their trade union, the British Medical Association (BMA). The health unions worked to isolate the doctors, refusing to mobilise in their defence.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn played a central role in the defeat, continually calling on the government to reach a negotiated settlement with the BMA. Eventually the government worked out a dirty deal with the BMA—with the assistance of Corbyn supporters, who had leading positions on the BMA’s junior doctors committee.

Corbyn claimed he was “up for” a fight to defend the NHS at the March London demonstration, but the fraudulent basis of this claim is seen in his continuing refusal to oppose Labour right-wingers in his own party, who support the very cuts and privatisation of the NHS that are leading to its destruction.

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