

Workers speak out in defence of public healthcare

“I believe the NHS is the greatest thing about British society”

By our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party members and supporters distributed copies of the statement, “Stop the NHS sell-off: Build rank-and-file committees” to people attending Saturday’s demonstration in London to mark the 70th anniversary of the creation of the National Health Service. Many people came to the stall of the NHS FightBack campaign, established by the SEP in 2012, to discuss the statement. WSWs reporters also spoke to a number of people attending the event.

Fiona came to the protest from Egham in Surrey. She brought a homemade placard reading, “Mental Health Cuts Kill.” She said, “I believe the NHS is the greatest thing about British society. We should maintain it. It’s terrible it is being underfunded.”

In her local area, St. Peter’s hospital, a sexually transmitted diseases clinic, has just been closed due to cuts. Asked why she felt it important to draw attention to mental health cuts she said, “I’ve had experience in many old families of a mental health emergency and discovered that even in emergency cases mental health services are just not there.

“People are left desperate and the desperation you feel when a loved one is not getting any help and support for the traumatic episodes that brought them there in the first place is terrible. Mental health issues are now like an epidemic and it’s totally unsorted. And like my family says, this is costing people their lives.”

Fiona said that an academic report issued earlier this year showing that health and social care cuts in the UK may result in the loss of 200,000 lives by 2020 was “a scandal ... It is criminal that we have something as wonderful as the NHS but that it is so underfunded so that literally thousands of people are dying.”

The NHS was being drained of resources, she said.

“There is a feeding frenzy by private companies. The NHS is like a lamb that is being savaged from all sides. Even the tendering costs a fortune.”

Asked what she thought of the comments by Lord Houghton, the former chief of staff of the British armed forces, that the military should get priority in receiving funding, Fiona said, “That is all wrong. I remember when a government minister said it was a scandal that we spend more on social care than we do on defence. That shocked me that he would say that. We have to stop pumping money into the military and really look after our people.”

Donatella is an assistant lecturer in anthropology at University College London. She said, “I came to the NHS demonstration to show my support for public services. I have seen the effects of austerity on students’ access to universities. I have seen these same effects on the NHS.”

Donatella said she had been reading the *World Socialist Web Site* “over the past five years because the lecturer I work for in the department had followed it for many years. It is a very good website for news and political outlook.”

Alison, a student videographer, said, “The NHS is my life, it will save my life and it will employ me when I will finish university. It is the most important thing that the UK has. The NHS is a lifesaving organisation that needs to be defended.

“The NHS is underfunded, the staff are overworked, these people have the passion for their patients and work, and they are not getting the funding and support they need. They are not given the resources they need. It is second class resources for a world class healthcare system. It is not acceptable.

“I spent three years working in a hospital for no pay, the only thing I got is a bursary. The new generation of students, nurses in physiotherapy, are not even getting a bursary. They have to pay.”

Reinhard is from Germany and said, “I work at Leeds University, in the public health department. I worked for the NHS a long time ago, now I am a teacher at the university for the NHS. I came here in 1980 and I appreciate the principles the NHS is based upon, which deals with needs rather than demand and money. My main reason to live in this country was the NHS.

“I am marching here to protest against the underfunding of the NHS, and to alert people that there is a danger that the NHS could be dismantled and turned into a profit-making organisation. I think it is the intention behind the government, from our economic system, capitalism, which wants to profit from education and health.

“One needs to find a way to allocate taxes to fund the NHS in a way that cannot be touched by the politicians. Why increase military spending while claiming there is not funding available for the NHS? They always have money to wage wars against other countries, as in Iraq.”

David is an IT engineer and said, “I used the NHS a lot as a patient with Crohn’s disease. It was part of my life, it helped me overcome my problem, and gave me the life I have today.

“I’m marching to support our NHS against privatisation. If it was privatised, we would not be able to afford healthcare. We pay taxes and healthcare should be free to everybody.

“The biggest problem is they cut the taxes for the mega-rich, who should be taxed much more. The taxes are hitting working people in the country instead. It is a big problem. Austerity needs to end now. People are being impoverished or being made homeless, not only individuals but also entire families.

“We have too many problems at the moment—Brexit, many job losses—but I would start with taxing the right people in the right areas so that the poorest in society would be supported. My view on war is that it is pointless. We dropped a bomb on Syria then we are asked to give money to charities to help Syria. This is crazy.”

John is 94 years old. He was protesting as “I wouldn’t be here without the NHS. I went for my first

job in a factory and there was a line of 400 people, and the foreman of the factory came out and said ‘You, you and you.’ And they happened to pick me, and they turned to the rest of them and told them to come back the following week to see if there were any opportunities.

“I’m afraid we might end up like that again. There’s so many people now not earning enough to eat and the nurses are having to go to food banks, it’s an absolute disgrace.

“We need a government that thinks a little bit more about working people and a bit less about big business making profits. When you stop and think of the number of businesses that have been palming money out into off-shore accounts—you’ve only got to read the Paradise papers and the Panama papers.”

John recalled the period before the NHS was founded, saying, “There were so many people that were ill, some of them were dying on the streets; something had to be done.”

Asked what he thought of the assessment in the SEP statement that the ruling class decided to concede the NHS after the Second World War due to their fear of revolution if reforms were not granted, he said, “Before the war ordinary workmen working in factories used to think and say that becoming communist was the only way to improve their situation. That’s what really started it. At the end of the war, with all the euphoria, everyone thought it was going to get better and for a time it did get better, but it has slowly gone downhill through poor government at every level.”

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