

Whitechapel protest against London health cuts

Our reporters
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More than 500 people demonstrated in East London last week against proposed cuts to the National Health Service (NHS). Protesters, including many medical staff, marched from the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel, to St Bartholomew's Hospital. The march met with warm support from local residents and traders in the residential areas of Whitechapel.

As well as the London Chest Hospital, the two hospitals are part of the Barts and the London NHS Trust. Along with the chest specialism, the Trust is also a London-wide specialist centre for head trauma treatment. The Trust last month announced plans to cut its workforce by 10 percent. It said it was making the cuts in order to meet efficiency savings of £20 billion demanded by the government by 2014-15.

The Trust has claimed that these cuts will mainly be to corporate and back-office posts, but they will directly affect patient care. Of the 630 proposed job losses, 250 are nursing posts. Consultants' hours will be cut, and 100 in-patient beds lost. Unions point out that cutting administrative staff also results in an increased workload for nurses.

The protests were against cuts across the NHS as a whole. As the march passed through the financial districts of the City of London, largely empty at that time of night, anger was directed at the premises of Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), Deutsche Bank, and Vodafone. Under a deal with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Vodafone was able to avoid some £6 billion in taxes. RBS is 84 percent publicly-owned, following a £45 billion government bailout. On the

same day that the protest took place it was revealed that ten senior executives at RBS are to share a bonus of up to £28 million.

Many protesters who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the connection between the cuts to the NHS and the profits of the banks. Fiona, an NHS worker and physiotherapy student, called for more money to be pumped into the NHS, combined with a ban on bankers' bonuses. "It's unacceptable to make changes to the NHS when the banks are paying themselves hundreds of millions of pounds in bonuses", she said.

Fiona opposed the drive towards a profit-based health service, and saw this as behind the proposed changes to the NHS. She cited the proposals to give consortia of GPs responsibility for budget commissioning. "GP commissioning has not been proven to work, there's no evidence for it. They haven't trialled it in one Trust. They're just going to rearrange the whole of the NHS on a whim. Changing the NHS into a system that is based on profit is unacceptable".

The attacks on the NHS would affect those least able to resist them. "We shouldn't be cutting money from the NHS because it's patients and people who are at the bottom rung, the poorest people in society, who are going to see the biggest changes".

One man who has participated in a number of NHS focus group consultations in recent years spoke about the intended general privatisation of the service. While David Cameron was in opposition, he said, he had pledged at a focus group meeting to privatise half of London's hospitals. He saw the cuts as a means to

generate a general collapse to further the privatisation drive.

A nurse from the Royal London, who asked not to be named, said services were already extensively privatised throughout the Trust. The pharmacy is now privately run. “When there are delays in replacing wound packs on wards now”, she said, “there is always a question as to whether this has been caused by privatisation”.

The previous Labour government pushed ahead the privatisation of the NHS by stealth, championing Private Finance Initiatives (PFI). Under PFI, NHS Trusts pay annual fees for new buildings provided by the private sector. Only clinical services remain within the NHS, while all other services are carried out by private corporations.

The PFI repayment burden has crippled hospital Trusts with decades of debt. On the same day as the East London protest, it was announced that the Queen Alexandra Hospital in Cosham, Hampshire, has cut 700 jobs, closed 100 of its 1,200 beds, and shut wards. Its chief executive warned of further job losses to come when cuts of £30 million are made from April. The Queen Alexandra opened just 18 months ago under PFI. The 35-year PFI contract currently costs the Trust £43 million a year. The PFI there is run by the Hospital Company, made up of Carillion and RBS.

Ben, a sixth-former from Camden, said he had come on the demonstration because “If we don’t put up a fight now it’ll just come to the point where the NHS will no longer exist”.

“Everyone will need and rely on the NHS at some point”, he said. He had been able to recover from illness thanks to the NHS providing treatment free at the point of access. “My grandparents have been ill, and if I was in America or somewhere like that you’d have to worry, ‘Do I go to university or do I take care of my grandparents?’”

Ben compared the demonstration with his experience of the student protests against university fee rises. He described how Aaron Porter, leader of the National

Union of Students, had been “mealy-mouthed”, but “the good thing was we didn’t just say ‘we’ve done that, we can go home now’, we got people out again and again and again until the point where the NUS became almost irrelevant. Now’s the time to come and fight, before it gets even worse”.



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