

British local elections: National Health Service under threat

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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None of the major British parties are telling the truth in their campaign for the May 5 local elections—that the passage into law of the Health and Social Care Act presages the ending of free and universal state-funded health care in the UK. Many National Health Service (NHS) jobs are at risk, as is access to health care itself.

The bill effectively ends free and comprehensive health care and hands huge swathes of the NHS over to the private sector. Hospitals will be able to use 49 percent of their hospital beds and operating theatre time to generate private income. Commissioning groups will see doctors and other health care professionals take control of their budgets and be able to outsource services to other providers.

Even before its passing, the NHS has been deliberately driven into near bankruptcy—a situation then utilised to justify further steps towards privatisation!

Dozens of health trusts are in financial trouble as successive governments have opened up the NHS to private profit, through outsourcing, the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and contracts with the private sector for surgical treatments.

It was the Conservatives who introduced PFI in 1993, whereby the private sector builds, finances and operates roads, prisons, schools and hospitals in return for an annual fee. But it was the incoming Labour government in 1997 and their financial advisors from the City, who famously boasted that they had got it up and running.

Private finance is vastly more expensive than public funding. At least 20 percent of Hospital Trusts' annual payments to the PFI companies represent the additional cost of private over public finance.

Labour insisted that PFI was the only game in town. It disguised the real cost with subsidies diverted from other services, land sales to the private sector to offset

the cost, cuts in bed numbers, and increased funding that went straight into the pockets of the contractors and their bankers.

But the austerity cuts, initiated by Labour and vastly expanded under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, have pushed the Trusts, particularly those with new PFI hospitals, over the edge.

The only part of the NHS budget that is ring-fenced from cuts is the part that goes to the private sector. In a now partially privatised service, £20 billion in planned cuts will fall on up to one third of the NHS workforce. Hundreds of thousands of clinical and support workers will lose their jobs, and would-be patients will go without treatment in what is already an overstretched service.

No one should be fooled by the announcement that the Department of Health will make £1.5 billion available to seven hospital Trusts unable to meet their crippling PFI repayments. Billed as a means of preventing these trusts from going bankrupt, this is a further subvention to private contractors at the expense of other health care services.

As usual, it comes with strings—"a clear programme to manage their resources in the future"—that presage further cuts in jobs, pay and conditions for workers and reduced access to healthcare for patients. In any event, as the extra money will be paid over the remaining life of the PFI contracts—between 16 and 29 years—the annual sum that any one Trust will get, if it receives anything at all, will be paltry.

One of the Trusts eligible for the bailout is the St. Helens and Knowsley NHS Trust, which includes the Whiston and St. Helens hospitals and which faces a massive deficit. The new PFI hospitals at Whiston and St. Helens, built at a cost of £338 million, are simply unaffordable at £42 million in 2012-13. This is more

than 20 percent of the Trust's income in 2010-11 and is likely to rise further if the experience at other PFI hospitals is anything to go by. Last September, the Trust said it was making £35 million of "cost improvements"—read cuts—just to meet the national savings required across the NHS.

Peterborough and Stamford Hospitals Trust, with a £330 million PFI hospital and an annual repayment of nearly £38 million from an income of £224 million, is expected to report a deficit of £56 million for the year 2011-12.

The situation in St. Helens and Peterborough is being replicated up and down the country. Indeed, all over Europe working people are seeing essential services cut. But the trade unions have refused to mobilise workers and the public to defend the NHS, the most popular institution in Britain, from creeping privatisation and the deepest cuts in its history.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the claim that there is no money to provide decent health care and public services. Hundreds of billions have been handed over to the banks, without any strings or even the pretence of going through the banks' books, much less any public consultation or accountability. Likewise, billions are made available to kill and maim people for military interventions in the oil and mineral-rich regions—from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya to the next targets, Syria and Iran. Only last week, the Treasury revealed that the rich pay lower taxes than anyone else.

The ruling class did not graciously bestow the NHS, but ceded it after bitter struggles as the necessary price to stave off social unrest. The right to health care can only be defended and extended by working people and their families mobilising once again as a class, independent of and in opposition to the corporate-controlled political parties, the trade unions and their so-called left supporters that seek to tie workers to the Labour Party and the institutions of the capitalist state.

The SEP stands for such a political mobilisation of the working class and for a solution to the economic crisis based on the needs of society, not the enrichment of the banks, corporations and speculators.

We call for the formation of rank-and-file committees of action, independent of the trade unions, in every workplace and community and the bringing down of the coalition and its replacement with a workers' government.

Our candidates, Danny Dickinson and Stephen Woodbridge, urge the residents of St. Helens and Peterborough to help us with our campaigns in Town Centre ward and Bretton North and where possible vote Socialist Equality Party on May 3.

To all our readers, we make the same appeal: Join the SEP and build the genuine socialist leadership workers and young people deserve.



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