

UK unions and Socialist Party isolate striking Mid Yorkshire NHS workers

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The Socialist Party is helping public sector unions Unison and Unite isolate 300 National Health Service (NHS) clerical and administrative workers employed by Mid Yorkshire NHS Trust at Pinderfields hospital in Wakefield, Dewsbury and District Hospital and Pontefract General Hospital. They have been left to bear the brunt of the huge financial crisis facing the trust, which is losing £100,000 a day and faces a £26 million deficit by the end of the year. It also has to make £24 million worth of savings demanded by the government.

The NHS workers began a three-day strike on November 20 in opposition to plans to axe 55 or more jobs and downgrade the pay of remaining staff by between £1,700 and £2,800 a year. The action follows a one-day strike on November 1 after an 88 percent vote in favour of industrial action.

The Socialist Party, a small pseudo-left group with a still significant presence in the union apparatus, has attempted to use the strike as a recruiting drive for the unions and to rehabilitate the discredited union bureaucracy.

At a rally of strikers on November 1, Unison branch secretary and SP member Adrian O'Malley sat side by side with Unison head of health Christina McAnea. At the time, McAnea, as chair of the staff side on the NHS Staff Council, was agreeing on the final touches with NHS employers nationally to a package of cuts to wages and conditions including the introduction of performance-based pay, an end to sickness absence enhancements and the removal of accelerated pay progression for some NHS workers. The agreement was signed on November 9.

The Socialist Party's paper, *The Socialist*, made no mention of this. Instead, it reported approvingly McAnea's comments at the rally in which she declared

that she was "pleased to be part of a union where members are prepared to come out to defend their pay and jobs" and that O'Malley was "the best branch secretary you could possibly have to fight this battle".

McAnea's remarks were, according to *The Socialist*, "a change" from her "cynical declaration" that the November 30, 2011, public sector pensions strike was just a "damage limitation exercise". In fact, McAnea was telling the truth. The bureaucracy used the strike to limit damage to the government before they signed a deal cutting pensions.

The Socialist claims, "As the attacks on the NHS have become ever more devastating, the union leaders are being made to regret the policy of inaction and concession bargaining over the previous period which has led to a weakening of many health branches as members have left or become inactive in disgust."

This means, it argues, that union bureaucrats in order to "protect their own positions...are being forced to turn to active branches they have tried to silence in the recent past."

It is correct that, in the face of widespread disillusion with Unison among public sector workers and even the victimisation and expulsion of its own members, the unions are making a show of opposition. But they have not changed their spots. A show is all that is on the agenda, not a turn to genuine struggle.

The SP has no hesitation in offering its services to the union bureaucracy in mounting this masquerade, because its members are a substantial part of the union hierarchy at the national and local level.

Unison bears a major responsibility for the crisis in the NHS nationally as well as in the Mid Yorkshire NHS Trust and its predecessor, the Wakefield Health Authority. In April 2002, the Wakefield and Pontefract Hospitals Unison branch published a 27-page report,

“Debts, deficits and service reductions: Wakefield Health Authority’s legacy to primary care trusts”, which reviewed the long-standing financial problems across the UK and in Wakefield in particular and explained the restructuring plans being drawn up. The report noted that years of underfunding had resulted in “downsizing of NHS hospitals”, which were often “dilapidated” and “poorly maintained” and cuts in services and NHS care.

“Major reductions in NHS services for elderly and vulnerable people, rehabilitation and community care have been accompanied by a shift in responsibility from the NHS to individuals and local authorities and by the privatisation of some services such as long-term care, dentistry and optical services,” the report declared.

It revealed that Wakefield Health Authority had been in deficit since its creation in 1996 and by 2000 had accumulated a debt of £16 million. Management consultants concluded that the only solution was to treat fewer patients and cut the number of beds by a quarter. They suggested the number of acute hospitals had to be cut from three to two and acute services centralised at a new hospital at Pinderfields. The Pontefract Hospital was to lose all acute beds and downgraded to an outpatient and day surgery centre. To do this, £176 million was required—the majority of it financed through the Private Finance Initiative, which the Blair Labour Party government, to which Unison was organically tied, insisted was the only way to build new infrastructure projects.

The report concluded, “There is no evidence to show that Pinderfields, Pontefract and Dewsbury hospitals have insufficient critical mass to be viable in the longer term.”

Unison then did nothing to mobilise NHS workers in opposition to PFI or the cuts that would inevitably follow. Instead, it promoted the Agenda for Change in 2004 by claiming that the radical reorganisation of job descriptions and work patterns would protect wages and conditions, concealing the clauses that provided for the end of national pay scales and an increased dependency on discretionary pay based on productivity gains.

In 2010, a new Pinderfields PFI hospital opened at an estimated cost of £320 million. It faces an annual bill of £35 million for 35 years, adding up to a total repayment

of £1.2 billion.

Last year, Mid Yorkshire NHS Trust admitted to 87 “Service Transfers”—a euphemism for patients having to be transported to other hospitals as a result of Pinderfield hospital running out of beds. In November 2011, the emergency unit at Pontefract Hospital was “temporarily closed” overnight, with management blaming a “national shortage of medium level doctors.”

In July, the Trust’s interim chairman, David Stone, revealed, “Investigations conducted over the last few months have confirmed that the finances of the trust were considerably worse than had been reported to the board and that the trust is unable to meet the previously agreed plan to achieve Foundation Trust status by April 2014.”

Unison has no intention of defending the terms and conditions of striking workers. The strike is being used as a platform for Unison’s bureaucrats to secure their own position within management structures. Rather than fight, their aim is to demoralise workers into negotiating a reduction in their wages and living standards.

Workers employed by Mid Yorkshire NHS Trust must break from Unison and its Socialist Party advisers. Action committees are required, independent of the unions, to unify all staff with patients and the wider population to prevent the dismantling of the NHS. The right to health care and secure and decent-paying jobs requires a political struggle against the capitalist system and the big business parties, including the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour.

A mass political movement of the working class, based on the fight for socialism, must be built so that workers can take power and form their own government. This would reorganise the economy to meet human needs, not private profit—including the preservation and extension of decent free health care for all.



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