

UK health unions mount feeble protest against attacks on National Health Service

Mark Blackwood
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Saturday's "We are One NHS" demonstration, jointly organised by the National Health Service (NHS) unions including Unite, Unison, the Royal College of Nursing and the GMB, was a dispirited affair with an extremely low turnout.

Over 60,000 NHS employees throughout the South West of England are facing attacks on their working conditions as a result of the creation of the South West Pay, Terms and Conditions Consortium, whose aim is to reduce wages, increase working hours, introduce performance-based pay, cut unsocial-hours and provisions for sick-leave and annual holidays.

As protesters numbering hundreds, not the expected thousands, assembled to march under the union's banner of "Unite the Resistance," Socialist Equality Party campaigners distributed leaflets replying to Unite head of health Rachael Maskell's attack on the SEP and the South West NHS Fight Back campaign.

The march in fact demonstrated that Maskell's claim that Unite is a "fightback union" carries little weight among health workers who have drawn lessons from the years of inaction and systematic betrayal of their struggles and "give-backs" to management over wages and conditions.

A public address system was brought into play in an effort to stir up enthusiasm in the crowd, to little effect. The "Internationale" was followed by a recording of US President Barack Obama's September 6 speech from the Democratic Party convention that was not made any more palatable by a musical accompaniment from Bruce Springsteen. As it played, a demonstrator approached an SEP campaigner and declared baldly, "This march is going to do nothing" and asked for contact details and information.

Having marched around the city centre to the

accompaniment of folk music, brass bands, drums, banjo players and whistles, the scene was set for the finale to the day's events—speeches by the assembled national and local trade union executive at Castle Park.

Pam Ward, a Royal College of Midwives steward, told a dwindling crowd that she was secretary of the Joint Union Committee for North Bristol NHS trust, as well as also being secretary of the Regional Social Partnership Forum. "We are all here because we are angry," she said, "and we are angry at yet again being made the scapegoats for all the stuff that is going on financially."

She appealed for people to stay and listen to other speakers with "a lot of passion and a lot of things to share."

Things did not get any better, as demagoguery was liberally deployed to conceal inaction. Tom Sanford, director of the RCN, stated, "The pay cartel has been set up expressly to dismantle the terms and conditions of NHS workers," focusing on meetings organised by the unions over attacks on NHS workers by North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust "who have recently issued advanced redundancies to their entire workforce."

In reality, such attacks are spreading, with South Tees NHS Trust and the health chiefs at the Royal Bolton Hospital in Lancashire issuing advanced redundancy or HR1 notices so as to rehire workers on inferior terms. It is not hard to see why, with Sanford meekly explaining that the union's intention is to try to "persuade trusts to pull out of the cartel" in the South West as well as "supporting those four trusts that never joined."

The next speaker, who allegedly had a "lot of passion and a lot of things to share," was Marvin Rees, the Labour Party's failed candidate for mayor of Bristol. Many of those who remained in the crowd booed at his

presence, with one person shouting, “Get off! We don’t want to hear your rubbish,” and another shouting, “Your party is the reason we are all in this state.”

Following Reese was an unforgettable performance by John Skewes, the national director for policy, employment relations and communications at Royal College of Midwives. He began by discussing how the Conservatives had lied about their plans for the NHS. He went on to address Prime Minister David Cameron personally by screaming down the microphone, “Liar! Liar! Pants on fire Cameron!”

The pathetic spectacle concluded with Skewes declaring that “While there is breath in my body I’ll fight to protect the NHS in the south west and across the UK.”

Saleena Williams, international officer of UNISON Central Health Branch, addressed the few die-hards that still remained by announcing that Dave Prentis, the general secretary of Unison, was the man to take the fight forward to the employers. A member of the SEP intervened by asking, “When? On his days off from presiding over the cuts as a non-executive director of the Bank of England?”

Prentis was appointed to the position by the Tory chancellor of the exchequer George Osborne on May 30.

Williams went on to emphasise that some 20,000 public sector workers took to the streets of Bristol to “fight back” on November 30, 2011. Naturally, no explanation was offered as to how the unions had whittled this down to 800 just one year later.



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