

Socialist Equality Party/SouthWest NHS Fightback

A reply to Unite Head of Health Rachael Maskell

Our correspondent
4 December 2012

Rachael Maskell, the Unite union's head of health, has written to the Socialist Equality Party and the SouthWest NHS Fightback campaign to complain that leaflets we have distributed at Musgrove Park Hospital, Taunton, are "factually incorrect" because "Unite is fighting back against changes to Agenda for Change, nationally, regionally and locally" and "are now consulting our members, preparing for industrial action."

Our criticisms of Unite and the other health unions have, therefore, "totally undermined the work that Unite is doing...will only give the employer more momentum to carry on doing what they are doing" and are "feeding the employer opportunity [sic] to destroy our union and members terms and conditions of employment."

She concludes with the ringing denunciation:

"Turning people away from a union that is fighting back is unbelievable, and just what the employers want. If people are not in a fightback union, then the employer will pick off staff and get them to sign away their contracts so your newsletter is playing straight into the employers agenda. Please let Unite to get on with fighting back for its members, and don't undermine this work further."

We reject with contempt Ms. Maskell's complaints regarding our exposure of her union's betrayal of health workers and entreaties to desist from doing so.

Maskell finds our unspecified leaflet "very disturbing to read." Perhaps this is because our intervention has received a friendly and supportive response from workers at Musgrove Park and many other hospitals. Rather than accepting the snow job offered up by Maskell, many workers have told us how fed up they

are with the continuous betrayals of the unions and asked us if they can take our leaflets to distribute in their rest rooms and departments. Our website has received close to 6,000 hits.

This is not the first time union officials have complained that our leaflets are factually incorrect without referring to any inaccuracies. We distributed two leaflets at Musgrove Park: one entitled "Oppose cuts to wages and conditions at South West Hospitals" and another "South West pay cartel ultimatum: Accept 10 percent cut to pay bill or lose 6000 jobs." Both give the reader an objective and genuine insight into the root causes of the attacks on their living standards and the privatisation of the health service and the way unions have colluded with the employers in implementing these attacks. We say to workers the unions are not organisations that "fight back," but "give back" and it is time to form action committees independent of them.

Maskell's response is similar to that of Ian Woodland, Unite's regional coordinating officer. He too alleged factual inaccuracies in our leaflets to cover up the sell-out by Unite and Unison of Southampton council workers fighting against the then-Tory council. The unions had claimed that the election of a Labour council would end the threat of pay, job and service cuts.

Instead, the new Labour council has announced 300 immediate job cuts as part of measures to slash £20 million from the budget that will mean the eventual loss of 279 equivalent full-time jobs and attacks to libraries and other services. The unions still peddle the lie that Labour is blameless, with Mike Tucker, from Unison, declaring that those facing redundancy are "being put at risk by the economic policy of the Conservatives."

One could cite a long lists of “fightbacks” by Unite that ended instead in “give-backs”—Hinchbrook Hospital, British Airways cabin crews, Visteon, public sector pensions, etc.

Unite is trying to distance itself from the rotten agreement reached on the National Health Service Staff Council to cut pay and conditions. Maskell still boasts, “Unite is fighting back against changes to Agenda for Change, nationally, regionally and locally.”

When this agreement was signed under the last Labour government, Unite argued that the radical reorganisation of job descriptions and work patterns it introduced would protect wages and conditions. In reality, at its core but deliberately downplayed by the unions, were provisions for the end of national pay scales and an increased dependency on discretionary pay based on productivity gains. These are exactly the provisos that the South West Pay Consortium of NHS Trusts is using to attack pay and conditions.

When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition imposed a pay freeze, increased the retirement age and cut pensions, Unite declared boldly, “The NHS two-year pay freeze is going nowhere until members are consulted.” It then allowed it to go ahead.

Of course, it was the Labour Party, of which Unite is a major funder, which began the privatisation of the NHS and then imposed austerity measures that paved the way for the coalition to mount the biggest attack the NHS has seen in its 60-year history. The massive £20 billion cut to the NHS £108 billion budget has brought tens of thousands of job losses, including front-line posts, and severe erosion of patient care.

The new Health and Social Care Act means that the end of state-provided health care in the UK is now on the agenda. The “duty to provide” has been replaced by a “duty to arrange.” Private firms will take over vast swathes of public health provision and step up cuts to services and jobs in order to fulfil their central aim of turning in big profits. Unite has no perspective to stop it.

The South West NHS Fightback campaign initiated by the SEP has noted the dozens of press releases, fruitless petitions and derisory small protests, lobbies and “debates” with employers mounted by Unite and company—all beating the drum of “Tory cuts” and ignoring the role of the Labour Party. Collectively, such toothless actions serve to dissipate the anger felt

by workers against the social counter-revolution they face and to prepare the way for defeat. More and more workers realise that the unions are tools of the employers and must be replaced.

The SEP and the South West NHS Fightback campaign urge workers to break from the unions and form independent action committees to unify with broader sections of the working class in an offensive against the dismantling of the NHS. We are for a mass political movement of the working class, based on the fight for socialism, so that the workers can take political power and form their own government. This would reorganise the economy to meet human needs, not private profit—the only way to preserve and extend decent free health care for all.

Maskell’s letter only demonstrates that our message has been heard loud and clear by the union bureaucracy, who recognise a dangerous enemy when they see one. It is a sign that we are on the right track and that we are finding a response among health workers wanting a genuine fightback, not yet more bureaucratic lies and manoeuvres.

SEP/South West NHS Fightback



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