

Thousands march in London against threat to close Lewisham Hospital Accident & Emergency unit

Our correspondent
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On Saturday 25,000 people marched through the South East London borough of Lewisham, to protest the threat to close Lewisham hospital's Accident & Emergency unit and to downgrade its maternity ward.

Workers, college and university students, retirees and families marched past Lewisham Hospital and rallied in Mountsfield Park. Workers at factories, hospitals, fire stations and shops stood and cheered the protest.

The closure and downgrading are part of government-appointed special administrator Mathew Kershaw's proposals to dissolve the South London NHS Trust (SLHT) which runs Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup, Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Woolwich and the Princess Royal University Hospital in Bromley. The Trust serves a population of 1.7 million across six boroughs.

Last July the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government appointed Kershaw under the "Regime for Unsustainable NHS Providers" due to debts largely accrued under forced Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. This is the first time such a measure has been used since passed into law by the last Labour government's 2009 Health Act.

Although Lewisham is not part of SLHT, it is being drawn into a major restructuring process with widespread closures and selling off. The government is planning to deploy the same provisions against 21 other National Health Service Trusts.

In contrast to workers sentiment on the protest to defend National Health Service (NHS) service provision throughout Britain and a struggle against the Tory/Lib-Dem coalition, the protest was organised by Save Lewisham Hospital campaign that boasts of support from Tory, Liberal Democrat and Labour Party

MPs. The chair of the rally cited Bob Stewart, Conservative Party MP for Beckenham as a supporter of the campaign as well as Simon Hughes, a senior Liberal Democrat. Right wing journalist and radio host Nick Ferrari was also invited to speak and said hospitals "have closed" and will "continue" to close, but the closure of Lewisham hospital is so "unjust".

Lewisham East Labour Party MP Heidi Alexander said she spoke on behalf of all Lewisham MPs when asking why a "successful" and "solvent" hospital is being used to solve NHS problems elsewhere.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners opposed such efforts to isolate the fate of Lewisham hospital from the fate of the NHS nationally. Thousands of copies of the statements "Fight back needed to defend the National Health Service" and "Government prepares to dissolve South London National Health Service Trust" were distributed. (These and other statements on the SEP's NHS Fightback initiative are available here: www.nhsfightback.org)

Chris, a student at Kings College in London was among those who spoke to the campaigning team about why he was attending the demonstration. "I'm angry at the amount of money I have to pay to go to university! I'm angry that they took away my EMA! At them making my mum redundant last year, and there's no jobs for her to get! That's because the economy is in such a horrible condition, because of what they've done. There are many, many reasons."

He continued, "The NHS is the greatest thing we have in this country. It's the best thing that came out of World War II for sure. I used to go to the hospital in Sidcup, but that was closed down. I was planning to go to the one in Lewisham, now that's being closed down.

I will have to go to the one in Woolwich, which is really far from me. And already when you go, there are massive queues. I can't imagine how it can cope with the other two hospitals closing down."

Asked what he thought of the role of the Labour Party, Chris said, "Didn't the Labour Party start the privatisation, not that long ago? They're just as bad. They don't say that they want to stop the cuts. They want to make cuts just like the Tories do. I don't see how they're any better. They're all conspiring against you. The people at the top of the unions remind me of the politicians, corrupt, power-hungry."

Kevin, a social worker, explained, "I've used Lewisham A&E before—the whole family have—and I can't imagine how we would do without it. Woolwich [A&E] looks like a warzone already. I'm old enough to know that every time a Tory government (or a coalition in this case) come in they'll start chipping away at funding for the NHS, because fundamentally they don't believe in it. They want it to be like America with everyone paying into insurance companies. Americans pay three times more for their health care than we do here in Britain for the NHS. British people want the NHS to stay. It's as simple as that."

Stacey, a teacher, said, "I think the NHS needs the funding. It is a fantastic concept and it should be defended. If there are attacks on it they would be essentially coming from capitalist firms seeing opportunities for profit. Everybody should have equal opportunity to get the services and treatment they deserve, irrespective of where they are in the country. I think it's very important that the NHS remains in the governance of the country, in public ownership. We have to have health available to everyone on the planet. The NHS is a model."

Stephanie explained, "The A&E has saved the lives of three members of my family. If we hadn't been so close, we all would have died. I had anaphylactic shock from a wasp sting. My husband had a stroke. My son had meningitis, very badly. They saved all of our lives! If we'd had to go up to Woolwich, none of us would be alive today."

Janis, a Lewisham resident said, "If you close the A&E and Maternity then basically you're closing Lewisham Hospital. We can't afford to lose the hospital and there's no need... It's just had a new A&E department built at the cost of millions of pounds. It's a

good hospital. It serves the public. It's outrageous that anyone should think of closing it! This is symptomatic of the larger attack. The NHS is the larger case and Lewisham Hospital doesn't stand independent of that."

Emma said, "I'm here because I don't want to see Lewisham A&E close. It's a perfectly good hospital. It's had lots of investment in it. It's running really well. It's tragic! I've had such good value out of the NHS really. I feel really sad to think that the care that I've had from the NHS over the last couple of years might not be available for other people. Obviously there are locally specific issues, such as the debt of the neighbouring trust. But it is part of a wider policy of PFI and NHS cuts—neither of which I agree with."

Michael, a local government worker said, "I'm totally against the closure of the A&E of Lewisham Hospital. All of that traffic will have to be diverted to other hospitals, which are overwhelmed already. Then there's the distance that residents would have to travel, which is totally unreasonable. We're paying into this service, but it's being diminished bit by bit by bit, and we're paying more and more and more. Those who've got money can pay for private health care and get the best service. But if you don't, you need to deal with what's there. So we working class people need to stand up and say something."



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