

UK: Unite union appeals to Labour to save the National Health Service

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Britain's largest trade union, Unite, held a public meeting in Bristol last week, "Health Reforms or Health Emergency", with the stated aim of providing the public with "a chance to vent its anger at the government's privatisation of the NHS."

The meeting was attended by approximately seventy people, mainly composed of local trade union representatives and members of Unite's National Industrial Sector Committee, who were shipped in to go through the motions of opposition.

Considering that they are 60,000 health workers in the South West and 10,000 in Bristol alone that are at the centre of a huge attack on their working conditions by a pay cartel of hospital trusts, the turnout was pitiful. Unite's claims of being 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 "givebacks" to management.

The meeting was opened with a meandering and dispirited contribution from Unite Head of Health Rachael Maskell, who outlined the devastating results of the Conservative/Liberal government £20 billion cuts to the National Health Service (NHS). Maskell informed the meeting that the cuts were resulting in "shedding jobs and we are not talking just a handful of jobs but hundreds and thousands of jobs... For some of our members they have lost over a third of their income already under this government and there is more to come."

She said she was not "painting a pretty picture" of the state the NHS and that the only objective of the government's health reforms was to "maximise profit out of this industry."

Maskell is incapable of explaining how under the watch of a union she says serves "the best interests of its members" a social counterrevolution is being carried out, resulting in the dismantling of the health service and massive job losses. Unite and the other health unions

protested that the South West Pay Cartel was a Trojan horse constructed by the government and trust executives to overturn national pay and work conditions, but have done nothing to oppose it. Instead they used the formation of the cartel as an excuse to agree a national deal without a fight in November 2012. Cuts to wages and conditions include many of those demanded by the pay cartel—the introduction of performance-based incremental progression, an end to sickness absence enhancements and removal of accelerated pay progression for some workers.

The health unions have prevented any kind of united struggle developing amongst health workers, patients, youth, the wider public and other workers under attack. This has taken the form of channelling any struggle against the £20 billion cuts into fruitless petitions, demonstrations and lobbying to "send a message" to the very people who view the NHS as a sixty-year mistake that should be dismantled lock, stock and barrel. Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor George Osborne and Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt et al couldn't give two hoots for the begging letters of the trade unions.

Of course no mention was made that the unions agreed to reduced pension benefits (Maskell referred to it as the "big pensions robbery") at the same time as the retirement age was increased.

Addressing the two-year pay freeze imposed in 2010, she informed the meeting that NHS workers' wages will not be frozen this year but will still be cut, saying, "We had a pay freeze and we don't know what's going to be happening from April, but it could well be that we get a one percent but it may not be one percent, in real terms a pay cut."

Maskell ended her speech with a call "to fight this. It's a tough, tough challenge, but we have to fight it and we have to fight it on every single level... We have to fight back, we can't capitulate."

She proposed nothing concrete.

It was left to Bristol NHS Trust's Staff Side Secretary, and Amicus union national executive council member (and Respect party member), Gill George, to masquerade as a representative of a radical, progressive "left wing" within the impotent and treacherous unions. George outlined how the Labour Party unreservedly supports public spending cuts, pay cuts for public sector workers, attacks on public pensions and that Labour MPs and councillors are not "throwing themselves behind every fight to defend the NHS."

However, she still continued to peddle the illusion that it was possible to have a "robust discussion with Labour" that will convince them to "oppose the cuts, pledge for absolute clarity to stop and reverse the privatisation of the NHS and build a campaign...and call a national demonstration to save the NHS."

It would have been just a little too uncomfortable for George to remind the meeting that the last Labour government was responsible for creating record levels of social inequality, initiated the privatisation of the NHS via its Private Finance Initiative programme, introduced a minimum wage that in reality legalised destitution levels of pay and was composed of war criminals who enthusiastically supported the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan (George is a member of the Stop the War Coalition).

George then proceeded to promote the claim that it was possible "to take the fight forward...led by the unions who are up for a fight" and that the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was seriously "consulting at the moment on a general strike."

She called for the TUC to hold a national demonstration for the NHS, arguing that "Unite as the biggest union in the TUC, biggest union in Britain, union with excellent fight back policies, I think it's the job of Unite to call that demonstration" and that "the Labour Party should join this call."



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