

National Health Services in London under sustained attack

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A series of protests on February 16 marked the culmination of a week of events called to “Defend London’s NHS.”

The aim was to apply pressure on National Health Service North West London as it made its final decision to close four Accident & Emergency units (A&Es).

Led by the Save Our Hospitals campaign, run by the Labour Party and the trade unions, Saturday saw three separate protests in Kingston, Hammersmith and Ealing, which are only a few miles apart.

This is in line with the strategies of the Labour Party and the unions, which have promoted a piecemeal approach to divide opposition. This has been implemented by their footmen in the pseudo-left parties, such as the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

Since the attacks on the National Health Service (NHS) began, there has been no united demonstration in London, never mind across the country. The week of protests was aimed at promoting the Labour Party, which began the privatisation of hospitals, as an opposition to the assault on the NHS.

The week began with the parliamentary launch of a London-wide campaign in defence of the NHS. A Save Our Hospitals press release stated that “after months of campaigning to defend individual hospitals, a united effort was needed to defend health services.” This event brought protesters from the various threatened hospitals under the same roof, but still without unifying their struggles.

The pseudo-left parties have throughout sought to block any public discussion of Labour’s role in the assault on the NHS. They have corralled workers behind the trade unions.

In the face of widespread protests and petitions over the last months involving around 300,000 people, the

Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has proceeded to force through a devastating assault on NHS service provision. Using mechanisms established by the last Labour government, they have dissolved the South London Health Trust, downgraded four A&E units in North West London, and downgraded Lewisham Hospital’s A&E and maternity unit.

Attacks on the NHS will have deadly consequences. Chair of the Lewisham Hospital Campaign Dr. Louise Irvine said, “As a GP I can state unequivocally that these proposals are going to cost lives.... Mothers whose labour runs into difficulty will be forced to endure a blue light ambulance trip to an unfamiliar hospital in the manner of decades past. We already know that we have mothers who are members of our campaign whose lives and whose babies would have been lost in these circumstances.”

Labour and trade union officials drove a wedge between opposition to the proposals to dissolve the South London Health Trust (SLHT) and opposition to the downgrading of neighbouring Lewisham Hospital. The Labour council and local Labour MPs agreed with the government’s measures in regard to the SLHT. They disagreed only on dragging Lewisham into these proposals.

The Stalinist *Morning Star* noted approvingly that some Tory MPs “are on the side of the campaigners with this one”.

This divisive campaign enabled the coalition government to impose all the cuts they had planned across both SLHT and Lewisham.

In North West London, there was sustained opposition to the closure of four A&E departments. Even here, however, the opposition was divided into separate campaigns for each hospital.

The unions and their allies spread illusions in a phony

consultation procedure that ignored huge petitions and declared there was popular support for the closure programme. They then switched to appeals to the government against the outcome of those consultations, agreed in advance between government and NHS management. The third stage was to promote an alliance with local councils (Conservative, Liberal or Labour) to force a review of the final decision.

Conservative Hammersmith council, promoted by Save Our Hospitals and its secretary, Labour MP Andy Slaughter, as allies, used the breathing space to make a secret deal with NHS North West London to force through the attacks.

Demonstrations were timed just days before each deadline date. The result of this bankrupt perspective was the closure of all four A&E units and their downgrading to Urgent Care Centres. Professionals have described these as glorified doctors' surgeries.

Last month, 25,000 people protested in defence of Lewisham Hospital. By contrast, the demonstrations during the week of action involved at most hundreds. Many workers stayed away after seeing the abject failure of the Save Our Hospitals' perspective.

On the Lewisham protest, Lewisham East Labour Party MP Heidi Alexander made the case for keeping Lewisham open at the expense of dissolving the SLHT because of debts accumulated under the last Labour government's private finance initiative (PFI) and restructuring measures.

The February 16 protests again ended with calls for London-wide protests. This was a fraud. Actress Vanessa Redgrave's son Carlo Nero, who is chair of Save Our Hospitals for North West London, issued a press statement February 13 pledging, "We are not opposed to change on any terms".

Pointing to the Lewisham decision (where A&E and maternity units have basically been closed), he insisted, "There are always alternatives" and that, if community pressure is maintained, a "better deal" can be obtained.

John Lister, director of Health Emergency (founded in 1983 with funds from the Labour-controlled Greater London Council and also funded since 1987 by the trade unions), spoke at a meeting protesting the sale of land at North London's Whittington Hospital. Lister apologised for the trade unions' sabotage of any united struggle by blaming the working class. "What matters most to the general public," he said, "is the hospital

down the road.... It has always been hard to co-ordinate campaigners in the north to join up with events that only affect those in the south."

The experience of workers in the protest campaigns up to now has confirmed the main demands of the Socialist Equality Party's NHS Fightback campaign. Our campaigners intervened in the protests with the statement "Fightback needed to defend the National Health Service," which insists that the defence of health care and every other basic social right can only be taken forward through a break from the unions and the Labour Party.

It continues, "We call for the formation of action committees by patients, hospital staff and the workers and youth whose lives and health are being jeopardised. The problem is not a lack of funds or resources, but the monopoly of wealth by the super-rich. This monopoly can only be broken by a mass movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it by a workers' government based on socialist policies."



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