

Health workers in southern England forced to sign new low-pay contracts

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TQtwentyone, which provides social care services to people with learning difficulties and mental health needs in southern England, is forcing its workers to sign new terms-and-conditions contracts including a restructured pay system, an end to unsocial hours payments and a drastic reduction in annual leave. Those who refuse to sign are threatened with dismissal.

The slashing of pay and conditions at TQtwentyone, which follows similar moves elsewhere in the country, makes a mockery of trade union claims that by agreeing to a national pay deal under the Agenda for Change framework National Health Service (NHS) workers would avoid enforcement of local and regional pay, terms and conditions.

TQtwentyone was launched in December 2010 by Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust (SHFT)—a big NHS service provider with more than 8,000 workers spread over a large geographical area in southern England. The new directorate was to be a more autonomous business-like organisation within the state-run Trust.

Managers claimed it “would benefit from having a commercially recognised name, to give us strong identity and to allow us to stand out against competitors.” TQtwentyone newsletters declared, “for staff it’s very much ‘business as usual,’” at the same time making it clear “the increased autonomy of TQtwentyone has given us the opportunity to develop our own terms and conditions for all new staff.”

The spin-off was expected to increase new business by 9 percent a year, by taking over services from other Trusts and local authorities. The merger of services with the accompanying slashing of jobs, wages and conditions and rationing of services is a vital stage in the government’s strategy of privatising the NHS.

NHS unions, including Unison, Unite and the Royal

College of Nursing, stood by when TQtwentyone was first created. Now, after taking part in bogus consultations, they are instructing the organisation’s 1,886 workers to sign the new contracts, which take effect from July 1.

A TQtwentyone support worker told NHS Fightback that the attack on pay and conditions started to bite immediately after the Trust he had worked for many years was merged with TQtwentyone last year. The new contracts involved a significant loss of pay as the unsocial hours enhancements make up a considerable portion of pay packets. All staff would lose several days of their current annual leave entitlement with the most senior ones losing more than a week. Under the new pay scales some workers could see more than 20 percent cut from their salary. TQtwentyone is also planning to develop an internal bank of staff with zero hour contracts aiming to halt the payment of overtime. Workers will get a meagre allowance if they commit to flexible working.

TQtwentyone managers are arguing that workers have to agree to lower their wages and conditions because they cannot compete with private providers “who are fiercely competitive on price in the social care market.” They say wages costs (£44 million on an annual turnover of £50 million, including £7.4 million on enhancements) are “unaffordable.”

It is clear things will get even worse. In a letter to employees, they point out that “our commissioners are under constant pressure to reduce the amount spent on social care”—revealing a lot about the future under the Clinical Commissioning Groups which come into effect this month under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government’s health reforms.

In its annual report, SHFT states, “The global economic downturn has had a major impact on public

sector finances, with the NHS required to make efficiency savings of approximately £20 billion between 2011/12 and 2013/14. The Trust expects to continue to face a challenging financial environment as Primary Care Trusts are abolished and commissioning becomes the responsibility of Clinical Commissioning Groups. It is likely that all commissioners, including local authorities, will continue to review their funding allocations and seek to gain greater efficiency and reduce contract values.

“The Trust must ensure it is best placed to manage any reductions in income and deliver maximum value for money. It is essential for Southern Health to continue to implement its cost improvement strategies.

“Whilst the Trust has agreed contracts with its major commissioners for 2012/13, the Trust’s 2012/13 financial plans will require the delivery of a challenging cost improvement programme amounting to 5 percent.”

The above plans are not unique to SHFT. The Foundation Trust Network, which consists of more than 200 NHS employers are demanding similar action across the country.

NHS Fightback insists that workers did not cause the global economic crisis and should not pay for the huge bailout to the bankers and financiers.

We urge workers in TQtwentyone, SHFT and across the country to form action committees, independent of the unions, to unify NHS workers, patients and the wider public against these unprecedented attacks on pay terms and conditions and the slashing of services.

A mass political movement of the working class, based on the fight for socialism, must be built 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—including the preservation and extension of decent free health care for all.

Visit the NHS FightBack site here to learn more and get involved: <http://nhsfightback.org/>



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