

UK: 50,000 march to save Stafford Hospital

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Last Saturday, up to 50,000 people marched to Stafford Hospital, part of the Mid Staffordshire National Health Service (NHS) hospital trust, protesting plans by government-appointed administrators to close the Intensive Care Unit, the Accident and Emergency (A&E) department and maternity services.

The town of Stafford has a population of 64,000. The scale of the demonstration testifies to the determination of local residents and hospital staff to protect the services offered there. Around 300,000 patients use the hospital every year.

The march was organised by Support Stafford Hospital (SSH), whose co-founder and former physiotherapist at the hospital, Sue Hawkins, declared, “The turnout exceeded our wildest dreams and just shows the strength of feeling about what could happen to the hospital. Local people spoke in a very loud communal voice and the administrators must listen to them.”

At the end of the march, speeches were given by patients, nurses and other health professionals at Stafford and neighbouring hospitals, as well as political and religious figures. Nurses expressed their delight in the huge turnout, with A&E sister Natalie saying, “This sight in front of us is the most incredible feeling, to know that we’ve got your support. This is why we come to work every single day. For all the stuff that we’ve gone through for three years, you guys are why we do it.”

Midwife Kelly explained, “I started my training here in 1995, qualified in 1998 and I stayed ever since. I don’t want to work anywhere else. The service that we provide is absolutely excellent. We look after the women that we care for really, really well, and it is lovely that we see the same women coming back in again and again and having babies with us.”

However, the SSH lead speaker insisted the event had

to be non-political—on the grounds that it was “a matter of life and death”. Bishop of Stafford Geoff Annas repeated the theme saying, “I’m not interested in scoring party political points.... That’s not what this afternoon is about.”

Stafford’s Conservative MP Jeremy Lefroy, who was allowed to speak, attempted to distance himself from his own party that is in power and dictating the cuts. He pleaded with Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt and the administrators to “build on what work has been done” to improve Stafford instead of “destroying it”. He said, “The staff at the hospital have been showing that there are ways that we can make this an acute hospital which balances the books”.

Lefroy has set up a working party that has been working closely with SSH and the Borough Council.

The demonstration concluded with a rendition of Paul McCartney’s “We All Stand Together.”

In fact, if any hospital in the UK showed that we don’t all “stand together” and that the struggle to save health services has to take a political form, it is Stafford. It epitomises the impact of the running down and privatisation of NHS provision by successive governments, and acts as a warning of the tragic consequences of these policies for working people.

The hospital has been the subject of five official reports in as many years into the shocking events surrounding the deaths of up to 1,200 patients as a result of the poor care they received between January 2005 and March 2009. In February, the report of a public inquiry chaired by Robert Francis QC was released, concluding that relatives “were failed by a system which ignored the warning signs and put corporate self-interest and cost control ahead of patients and their safety.”

Francis insisted that there should be no “scapegoats”—at least no one in a position of authority like Sir David Nicholson, who ran the regional NHS

strategic health authority in Stafford until 2006 and is now NHS chief executive and head of the NHS Commissioning Board. And certainly not the then-Labour Party government, which was intent on cutting costs and opening up the NHS to further privatisation. It was under Labour that, in 2006, Mid Staffordshire Trust was told it must gain Foundation Trust status—an initiative aimed at making hospitals semi-independent of the Department of Health, “freeing” them to find private sources for their budgets. An earlier 2010 report by Francis showed how this had led to almost third-world conditions after the trust decided to reduce costs by £10 million and cut 150 jobs.

Francis’s latest report makes nearly 300 recommendations for improvement, but many are likely to be rejected as they conflict with the interests of the private sector and its representatives, whose takeover of the NHS is assured by the government’s Health and Social Care Act. This month, as a result of the Act, hundreds of Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities were replaced by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), run in the main by general practitioners, with control of £60 billion of health spending. A new regulatory body, Monitor, was also created.

Cuts of £20 billion in the NHS budget by 2015—one fifth of the overall total—are forcing the closure of dozens of department and the reduction of staff levels by up to 20 percent, with remaining staff made to work on new contracts on lower wages with larger workloads.

Stafford Hospital has been the first to feel the full force of the new regime created by the Health and Social Care Act. Just days before the demonstration, Monitor appointed administrators to run the Mid-Staffordshire Trust—the first Trust ever to go into administration—after it was declared the Trust was “neither clinically nor financially sustainable in its current form” and “was likely to become unable to pay its debts.”

Last year, the Trust had a £14 million drop in annual income and had to have a £20 million bailout. The administrators are expected to report back in nine weeks’ time before holding a six-week “consultation”.

The SSH is still peddling the illusion that if the administrators and the local CCG “are prepared to listen and work with the people of Stafford then it

could be that they are able to play a role in being able to bring about positive change” and that “Jeremy Lefroy’s Working Party has been working and continues to work on an alternative solution and will endeavour to have that considered.”

The truth is Stafford Hospital demonstrates that decent health care is incompatible with the drive for profitability and the carving up of the NHS by the corporations. It points to the need for an independent political movement, outside of the control of the trade unions and any of the bourgeois parties, in the fight for a workers’ government and the nationalisation of health provision—including the vast pharmaceutical companies—under the democratic control of working people.



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