

Protest opposes London-wide National Health Service cuts

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Around 7,000 people marched on Saturday at the first London-wide protest against cuts to the National Health Service (NHS). This is less than a third of the number that marched in defence of Lewisham Hospital in south London in January, and around the same number as marched against the sell-off of parts of the Whittington Hospital, north London, in March.

Called by *Save our Hospitals* —a front for the Labour Party and trade unions—the organisers tried to talk up the demonstration as a spontaneous expression of popular anger at the assault on the NHS. It stands, rather, as an indictment of the political perspective advanced in various local protests.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has already forced through a devastating assault on NHS provisions. It has pursued aggressively the £20 billion “efficiency savings” package of cuts launched by the previous Labour government. The coalition has also pushed further the privatisation programme begun by Labour with its building of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) hospitals. The Health and Social Care Act, which took effect last month, abolished hundreds of Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities and handed them over to Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), which will control some £60 billion of health spending. Under the government’s statutory regulation, it will be virtually compulsory for the CCGs to outsource to the private sector.

Health care in London has been particularly targeted. Eight of the capital’s 32 Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments are slated for closure and downgrading. Other services, including maternity units, have been targeted for downgrading. Hospitals are pushing to sell off land in order to make the transition to Foundation Trust status.

These moves are far advanced. The downgrading of Lewisham’s A&E and maternity unit was accompanied by the dissolution of neighbouring South London Health Trust (SLHT). The decision has been taken to close four A&Es in northwest London. The outcome will be death and suffering for thousands of people.

That the onslaught has got so far despite overwhelming popular opposition is down to the Labour Party and trade unions, and their loyal apologists in the pseudo-left parties like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP).

In south London, Labour councillors and Labour MPs agreed with the government’s proposals for the SLHT. They disagreed only on dragging Lewisham Hospital into those proposals. By dividing the two attacks, their campaign enabled the government to impose all the planned cuts across both areas. In northwest London, opposition to the A&E closures was divided into separate campaigns for each hospital.

These campaigns promoted illusions in phony consultation procedures, after which they moved to appeals to the government to act against the predetermined outcome of the consultations. The latest stage is to promote alliances with local councils, of every political persuasion, to force a legal review of the decision. The outcome can be seen most clearly over plans to downgrade Charing Cross Hospital’s A&E. Tory Hammersmith Council, promoted as a potential ally by the *Save Our Hospitals* campaign, took the opportunity to do a secret deal with NHS northwest London to force through the changes.

Speaking on Saturday, the SWP’s Candy Udwin said the Lewisham campaign was the model for showing “us how to organise.” She did not mention that that campaign resulted in the destruction of the SLHT and the downgrading of Lewisham’s services.

A public meeting of the London *Keep Public* campaign in February, chaired by Udwin, would not even demand that Labour repudiate PFI for risk of offending a bureaucrat or two. Udwin deferred a discussion of aims and moved instead to discussing printing leaflets with “broad slogans” that “everyone agreed on”—and to securing the funding for this from Labour and the unions!

The National Health Action Party has been founded by Dr. Clive Peedell, who told the rally that “Clinical excellence and democratic process mean nothing to this government.” The party, however, pledges only to “insist the most damaging parts of the Government’s NHS legislation are repealed.”

The result of all this was the small attendance at the demonstration. Udwin, who chaired, stressed the need for “united action,” insisting the rally was “a coalition of campaigns, of unions, of parties.” Shirley Franklin (Defend the Whittington Hospital Coalition) called it a “coalition of parties and all trade unions.”

In practice, this means opening the platform to parties that have shown their willingness to implement cuts as soon as they come into local power. Darren Johnson, Green Party member of the Greater London Authority, echoed Udwin’s description of the failed Lewisham campaign as “an inspiration.” In Bristol, Green councillors have entered a “rainbow cabinet” set to make £35 million in cuts for 2013-2014. In Brighton and Hove, where the Green Party heads a minority administration, the council has implemented nearly £20 million in cuts resulting in 120 job losses, services being slashed and rents for council housing raised.

Above all, Udwin’s coalition means pushing workers back behind unions that are sabotaging and betraying their struggles. It means allowing Labour MPs, councillors and members of the GLA to pose as defenders of the NHS regardless of their party’s record. Before the march began, Dr. Onkar Sahota pledged the support of the Labour group on the GLA. At the closing rally, Jeremy Corbyn MP said, “When we’ve defeated the Health and Social Care Act, let’s end PFI ... they are the leeches on our service”—something Labour, which introduced PFI, has no intention of doing.

Norma Dudley, a Unite rep, called for protesters to lobby their MPs and join a union “that’s standing up” in defence of the NHS. Unite’s record proves it is in cahoots with the government. Yorkshire Ambulance

Service Trust deputy chief NHS Executive Stephen Moir commented recently that Unite (which represents 10 percent of ambulance crews there and has since been derecognised) had “advised its members to accept the Trust’s proposals on changes to the A&E workforce.” This, he noted, “is inconsistent with their stated public position to reject the Trust’s plans.”

Saturday’s rally was intended by the pseudo-left groups to provide a cover for the unions’ systematic sabotaging of any real struggle against government austerity. Had Unite or any union any genuine intention of organising a fight, they could easily have brought tens of thousands of health workers onto the streets.

Those workers present expressed their anger at the cuts and a determination to defend the NHS. But this will not come from the unions or Labour. The defence of health care and every other basic social right can only be taken forward through a break from these bankrupt organisations. Action committees must be formed by patients, hospital staff and the workers and youth whose lives and health are being jeopardised. The Socialist Equality Party calls on working people to join its FightBack campaign at nhsfightback.org.



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