Labour-controlled Welsh Assembly carries out massive attack on the National Health Service

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18 July 2013

The Labour Party-controlled Welsh Assembly has carried out a massive attack on the National Health Service (NHS), entirely in line with the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's austerity agenda.

Over the last three years Labour has cut an unprecedented £500 million from the NHS budget. Further huge cuts to jobs and services are in the pipeline even though many services are already in a critical state. Earlier this year a letter from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine signed by 24 consultants at hospitals across Wales warned that "emergency departments are at the point of meltdown" and that most days "they are seriously overcrowded" jeopardising patient care and safety.

Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (UHB) is one of the largest NHS organizations in Wales, providing health services to around 472,400 people living in the Welsh capital Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. On June 28, it began a 90 day consultation process over plans to issue redundancy notices to 385 health workers. A UHB spokeswoman said, "These proposals have been discussed with local trade union leaders prior to launching and we are now entering a period of formal consultation."

The job cuts are a result of the measures UHB approved in March to slash its spending by £90 million, including a £35 million cut to the wage bill. UHB Chief Executive Adam Cairns stated, "Services must change to meet current, and future, demand and this work needs to start quickly."

The public service union Unison has been collaborating with the Welsh Government in implementing attacks on NHS workers and services for years. It proclaimed that it is seeking "urgent discussions" with the Minister for Health in the Welsh Government Mark Drakeford over the latest cuts.

The real purpose of any discussions will be over how best Unison can ensure they go through. A recently published Unison Cymru/Wales document, "A Future of Wales," states that "Unison Wales recognizes the challenges facing the sector and appreciates the need for sensible, considered reform. This is why we have committed to working with the Welsh Government in the NHS, for instance, on helping to make that organisation more efficient and cost-effective while encouraging a more skilled and flexible workforce."

"It should be evident that highly specialist and costly services cannot be provided at every hospital," it continued. "Rationalization and centralization can bring benefits for patients, as long as this—rather than expense alone—is the driving principle for reorganization, while taking proper account of financial realities."

To save face the British Medical Association (BMA) Cymru/Wales has pulled out of a strategic union-management pay task force designed to identify "efficiency savings" following UHB's announcement of the job cuts.

In an attempt to cover up the Labour Party's role, BMA Welsh Secretary Richard Lewis said, "I recognize the Welsh Government's good intentions in fostering debate between NHS employers and the health service trades unions, but Cardiff and Vale Health Board's actions are a betrayal of the trust necessary for those discussions to bear fruit."

Other health boards are introducing similar proposals to those at UHB. There are cuts of almost 10 percent (£93million) to the 2013/14 budget at the Betsi

Cadwaladr University Health Board, the largest health organisation in Wales, providing services mainly in north Wales to around 676,000 people. Around 800 job cuts are being proposed including frontline doctors and nurses. Last month the health board was severely criticised for delays to operations, growing waiting lists and the handling of a Clostridium difficile infection which had contributed to seven patient deaths. Last week consultants expressed concerns about the board's ability to provide patient care and safety.

Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board which provides health services to 500,000 people in Swansea, Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend has to cut its budget by £56 million before next April. It is already more than £5 million in the red just two months into the new financial year.

No opposition to these latest cuts can be expected from the unions, as their record shows.

In 2009, the Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition Welsh government instigated a restructuring of the health service parallel to that carried out by Labour at Westminster. The number of NHS Trusts and Health Boards were slashed, leading to thousands of workers losing their jobs while thousands more were re-located, re-deployed to other jobs or re-graded.

In 2010, the coalition began to reduce the number of Band 5 and above staff, including frontline staff such as nurses, midwives, paramedics, pharmacists and physiotherapists, by three percent every year for three years—regardless of the devastating impact it had on frontline services and patient care.

In 2011, NHS Confederation Director Helen Birtwhistle stressed the "pressing need for changes" and for people to stop thinking about hospitals as the "be all and end all" of the NHS. Health Boards were forced to find "efficiency savings" of at least five percent per year.

According to a Wales Audit Office report issued in 2011, the NHS in Wales will have a projected cash shortfall of up to £570 million by 2013/14. The Welsh government justified its attacks on the working class by attempting to shift the blame onto the national Westminster government, saying that an "unprecedented level of financial pressure means we have had to take tough decisions on public spending."

As elsewhere in the UK, it has been the working class that has been forced to bear the brunt of the global economic collapse that started in 2008. Public sector workers in Wales and the UK are in their third year of pay freeze, reducing their real pay by 13 percent, and have seen their pensions slashed. Some 17,000 public sector workers in Wales have lost their jobs.

This is just the start. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government has escalated its plans to dismantle and privatise the NHS in England under the Health and Social Care Act, which came into effect in April this year. Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are following suit.

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