

UK health secretary gives go-ahead for closure of Trafford General Emergency unit

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Plans to axe the Accident and Emergency (A&E) unit at Trafford General in Greater Manchester have been approved by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

The hospital is the birthplace of the National Health Service (NHS), launched in 1948. The closure of the A&E unit is accompanied by the gutting of other key services from the hospital which are dependent on it, such as the Intensive Care Unit and the Paediatric and Observation Unit. Along with these will also go emergency surgery and some elective surgery.

Hunt announced the decision July 11, following a review of plans by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP). The official remit of the IRP is to advise the government on contentious service changes. The rubber-stamping of the closure plans was a foregone conclusion given the unrelenting assault being waged by the government on the NHS with the planned closure of over 34 A&E units nationally and the cutting by a fifth of its national expenditure by 2015.

The IRP concluded that the “clinical case for change is clear.”

Speaking before Parliament, Hunt stated cynically that the measures were “necessary to provide safe and sustainable health care in the North West.”

It was widely cited in the media that the A&E unit is the second smallest in the country, as if this constituted an incontrovertible argument for its closure! The reality is that a population of over 200,000 will no longer have access to an A&E unit that treats around 38,000 people a year. It will be replaced by a consultant-led Urgent Care Centre, which cannot treat a number of life threatening conditions and will be closed between midnight and 8 a.m. Within two to three years this will be replaced by a nurse-led Minor Illness and Injuries Centre capable of treating little more than bumps and bruises.

The transfer of patients to other A&E units will compromise the “golden hour” rule, with longer journey times and delays in receiving treatment upon arrival.

The decision to finalise the closure of the A&E unit and withdrawal of other critical services at Trafford General is an indictment of the Save Trafford General campaign (STG). From the outset, the campaign, organised by a wing of the local Labour Party apparatus, maintained that the hospital could be reprieved through applying pressure on the Conservative Party/Liberal Democrat government. Its sole objective was to shore up the credibility of the Labour Party and trade unions.

If the Labour Party and the trade unions were truly involved in a fight to defend the NHS then Trafford General, given its historical significance, would be at the forefront of such a campaign. The opposite is the case. STG’s campaign diverted and demobilised opposition to the closure of the A&E unit, as evidenced by the July 5 anniversary celebrations organised outside Trafford General to mark the 65th anniversary of the NHS.

Last year, over 1,000 people marched against the threat to the hospital, while the July 5 event was attended by barely 200. It was billed by STG as a “last ditch plea” to the health secretary. Concluding his remarks at the anniversary rally, campaign chair Matthew Finnegan said he was “making one last plea to Mr. Hunt as he makes his final decision on the future of the birthplace of the NHS. I think he will get the message eventually.”

Finnegan praised the Unite union “for providing so much support for our community campaign, and doing it so sensitively and so well. It’s really been an exemplar of how the trade union movement can work

with communities and meet common goals.”

The truth is that Unite and other unions have functioned as the chief mechanism for imposing the cuts. They have ensured that there has been no expression of opposition by health workers within the hospital to the plans to dismantle it. Finnegan could not point to a single action Unite—the largest union in the country with 100,000 members in the health service—has undertaken in opposition to the attacks at Trafford General. It has presided over thousands of jobs losses, wage cuts and decimation of services.

The union’s “People United” buses, ending a two-week tour of towns and cities, were prominently parked outside the hospital and in the park where the rally was held. The presence of the buses was listed on the Unite website as a “photo opportunity event.”

In his speech to the rally, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey was forced to concede that the Labour Party had been fully complicit in the undermining of the NHS. He said, “And when people say it was Labour that started market reforms, it was Labour that expanded the role of the private sector, then they are right.”

However, after having acknowledged this reality, McCluskey peddled the line that Labour could be re-won to its former programme of reformism. In a reference to the postwar 1945 Labour government that established the welfare state, including the NHS, he said Labour Party leader “Ed Miliband tells us we need the spirit of ’45. Well I’m up for that Ed. We need the spirit of ’45 to return to the Labour movement. But we also need the faith to fight as well; for our National Health Service.”

Such empty rhetoric could not conceal the truth that not a single leading Labour Party representative or local MP was prepared to take part in even this watered-down protest. The two local Labour MP’s have endorsed the closure plans at Trafford General. Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham has only called for it to be put on hold, so that the measures can be considered within the wider review of Healthier Together, which aims to close more A&E units across Greater Manchester. (See, “Greater Manchester, Britain hospitals face downsizing”)

The NHS FightBack campaign, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, has warned the working class against basing opposition to the attacks on Trafford

General Hospital on appeals to the government. The fight against the total dismantling of Trafford General Hospital cannot proceed outside of breaking the grip of the Labour Party and the trade unions over the working class, as a precondition for a genuine mobilisation against the assault on the NHS.



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