

UK unions promote Labour at health care march in Manchester

Robert Stevens
1 October 2013

Around 50,000 people protested cuts to the UK's National Health Service (NHS) in Manchester Saturday in a march called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The march, billed under the heading "Save Our National Health Service", set off from the city centre, passing the annual conference of the ruling Conservative Party being held in the city before ending with a rally in Whitworth Park, two miles away.

Health workers from around the country attended, as did protesters involved in campaigns against austerity cuts. Many in attendance were local and regional trade union officials as well as members of the Labour Party. The Green Party had a presence at the march.

The demonstration was larger than the previous TUC "March for the Alternative" protest held in Manchester in October 2011, reflecting the growing anger of workers in opposition to the ongoing privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS), deepening austerity, and widespread poverty.

The TUC's purpose in calling the march was to head off growing opposition to attacks on the NHS into the dead end of support for the Labour Party, particularly by presenting the election of a Labour government in 2015 as the only means to "save" the NHS.

The march was led off by Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham, who was given pride of place at the rally.

The promotion of Labour as the saviour of the NHS is a monumental fraud. Labour spent its 13 years in office since 1997 undermining the health service. This included the widespread use of the Private Finance Initiative to build hospitals costing multiple times their initial outlay by saddling these institutions with massive debts for facilities that often had up to 28 percent fewer beds. These policies laid the basis for the privatisation of the NHS that is now underway and is

codified in the Health and Social Care Act, which came into law this year.

The £20 billion in NHS cuts (a fifth of its total budget) being imposed by the Conservative-Liberal coalition were proposed in June 2009 by Sir David Nicholson, the former NHS chief executive. They were immediately endorsed by the last Labour government under Gordon Brown, with Burnham as Health Secretary at the time. In September 2009 Burnham told the Kings Fund think tank that Labour, "will set out the scale of the efficiency and productivity challenge year on year, building up over time, with the most demanding savings coming later".

He added that this would "begin the process of showing how we realise the challenge of finding £15 billion to £20 billion of savings" in the period up to 2014.

Recognising the growing public anger, the TUC platform was forced to adopt a definite anti-Tory and leftist tone. Speakers included trade union leaders and others advanced as "left wing", including Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, Fire Brigades Union leader Matt Wrack and leading Labour Party supporter and author Owen Jones. Also speaking was TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady.

Burnham quoted Anurein Bevan, the Labour Minister for Health who founded the NHS as part of the postwar Labour government, who said it would only exist as long as there "were folk with the faith to fight for it". He added that a new Labour government would repeal the Health and Social Care Act. He concluded by playing down the assault being made on the NHS by the ruling elite saying, "I am sure there will be an NHS forever".

Burnham was followed by Jones, who stated that Burnham had "done a fantastic and courageous job in

fighting privatization”. Responding to rumours that Labour leader Ed Miliband was looking to move Burnham away from his Shadow Health brief, he said, “Let’s say loud and clear if Ed Miliband is listening. Do not move Andy Burnham under any circumstances”.

Jones concluded by calling for participation in the TUC-backed Peoples’ Assembly “day of national civil disobedience” on November 5.

O’Grady said the Tories “don’t like the NHS as it’s the greatest ever socialist achievement of this country”.

Declaring that the values of the NHS were the “people’s values and “trade union values”, O’Grady said, “We are going to fight for them”. She concluded, “We have got to believe that we can stop them. We have got to fight so we stop them and we have got to stay together because together we will win”.

The fact remains that the TUC yet again proposed nothing whatsoever to organise the collective strength of health service and other workers against the most brutal austerity measures since the 1930s. The TUC and its affiliated unions have not lifted a finger in defence of NHS jobs and services—confining workers to signing petitions, writing letters to MPs, and participating in campaigns to keep open this or that hospital or unit, with the goal of having the axe fall somewhere else.

A World Socialist Web Site reporting team spoke to a number of workers who attended the demonstration.

Cardia and Sonia have worked as nursing assistants at Lewisham hospital in London for five years.

Cardia said, “We are here to save our maternity and our birth centre and to save our NHS because it’s the people’s NHS and not the prime minister’s or anyone else’s. It has taken us five hours to get here from Lewisham today. We have a day off today but are working again tomorrow”.

Cardia explained that the government was appealing a High Court ruling to keep open the hospital’s Accident and Emergency unit. If the government is able to win the appeal, then “loads of other services will be cut. The local people depend on us and if it was removed those people will have to go far. It needs to stay.

“It’s our NHS. Why do they want to privatise it? Leave it alone. It’s going towards privatisation like it is in America. It’s all about money to them. It will put people’s lives at risk”.

Alison, a support worker at the Rolls Royce plant in

Bristol, explained that workers at Rolls Royce also faced attacks, as the number of engineers had dropped from 20,000 over 20 years to just a few thousand today.

Chris, from Salford, said that he was “fed up with all” political parties, “It seems that workers are just kept waiting for someone to give a lead”.

He was angry that due to recent welfare cuts he and his wife, who were both working, had lost their child benefit payments. He denounced “the hypocrisy of them all”, particularly his local Labour Party MP Hazel Blears.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact