

UK: Trafford Council drops challenge to local Accident & Emergency closure

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12 October 2013

The UK government's decision to downgrade the Accident and Emergency (A&E) unit at Trafford General hospital, in Greater Manchester, England will not be challenged in the High Court.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt approved the plans to downgrade the emergency department in July, along with the withdrawal of other services including the Intensive Care Unit, Paediatric Unit, Acute Surgery and some elective surgery.

Trafford Council had said it would pursue a judicial review of the plans backed by the government but has subsequently announced that it will not proceed with the action. The reversal was announced at a council meeting on September 18 by the ruling Conservative group. It has justified the decision based on legal advice.

A council spokesman stated, "This advice was that there was no grounds on which Trafford could challenge the matter given the soundness of the way in which the Secretary of State has approached this decision."

The decision to take legal action had received cross-party support. The official Save Trafford General (STG) campaign, dominated by local Labour Party representatives, hailed this as a victory for the popular will. It has failed to issue a statement on the turnaround.

In endorsing the plans Jeremy Hunt set down six safety conditions. In reference to these, Joanne Harding, STG co-ordinator and Labour councillor, told the press, "We intend to hold the people making these decisions to account. These conditions were put in place for a reason and as a campaign we will not stand aside and see them blatantly ignored.

"We will continue to challenge, scrutinise and fight to ensure that the public of Trafford have access to good,

local healthcare."

Such bluster does not oppose closure. It lends credence to "safety conditions" that only maintain the myth that the cuts will not compromise patient safety. They consist of vague assurances and token measures whose only purpose is to deflect patients to other overstretched A&E units and community services. They take as their point of departure the downgrading of the Trafford General A&E to an Urgent Care Centre, which will not provide treatment for a number of life-threatening conditions and will be closed from midnight to 8am.

The reference to clinical criteria for "a safe move" is only mentioned in relation to a further regressive step to downgrade the Urgent Care Centre to a Minor Injuries Unit which, as the name implies, will offer little more than treatment for bumps and bruises. This is the prospect that confronts the local population of over 200,000 people in two-to-three years time.

The fact that the STG has been reduced to ensuring the terms upon which the A&E unit will be axed is the culmination of a process in which it has kept opposition within official channels and worked to maintain the domination of the main political parties, Tory and Labour.

Using the rhetoric of public accountability, the STG has ensured compliance with a framework used to rubber-stamp A&E and other ward closures across the country. In relation to the sham consultation last year, while it was obliged to criticise the process, the STG campaign marked its conclusion by handing in a petition of over 12,000 people against the axing of the A&E on the grounds that it would be taken into account by Prime Minister David Cameron. Following the approval of the closure plan by local health bosses in January, the STG then promoted Labour and Tory

councillors using their powers through the Trafford and Manchester Health Scrutiny Committee to refer the matter to the health secretary for a final decision—which Hunt then rubber-stamped.

From its inception the STG campaign has divorced the fight to defend the hospital, which is where the National Health Service was launched in 1948, from the general assault being waged against public health provision. It maintained the political fiction that Trafford General could be reprieved by a government which is dismantling and privatising the NHS through the Health and Social Care Act and the implementation of £20 billion worth of cuts by 2015—the equivalent of 20 percent of annual spending. A total of one-in-ten A&E units across England have been closed or face a similar fate.

As with campaigns that have emerged around the country against A&E closures, the STG campaign has fragmented opposition along local lines and promoted alliances with the main parties of the political establishment, on the basis of local councils using their limited powers to appeal decisions. The primary role of these campaigns has been to provide a veneer of opposition to be donned by the Labour Party and the trade unions.

However, in Trafford even this level of pretence has proven impossible. The two local Labour MPs have backed the closure plans on the pretext of seeking empty assurances that money be reinvested in alternative A&E units and the ambulance service, forced to transfer blue-light calls over longer distances. Labour's Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham's only intervention has been to call for the closure plans to be postponed by the health secretary so they could be considered within the context of wider downsizing planned for A&E departments across Greater Manchester. The largest health service union, Unison, has backed the withdrawal of services at Trafford General from day one.

Matthew Finnegan, STG chair, would have it that the buck stops with the government, but the record shows otherwise. The dismantling of Trafford General began under Labour, with the closure of the maternity unit in 2010. The incorporation of Trafford Healthcare NHS Trust into Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation in April 2012 was in preparation for further cuts. The Foundation Trusts were introduced

under Labour to place hospitals on a commercial footing and facilitate partial privatisation. The £20 billion worth of cuts in the NHS budget being implemented by the government were initiated by Labour.

The Socialist Equality Party initiated the NHS FightBack campaign based upon the need for an independent political mobilisation of the working class to defend public health care as a social right. It emphasised the need for new forms of struggle, based upon action committees to unite health workers and the local community, to prevent the withdrawal of services which they depend on for their lives and well being.

Such an initiative requires the adoption of a socialist perspective, which rejects the claim that there are no funds or resources to provide for public health care by challenging the monopoly of wealth by the super rich. There exists no other perspective upon which to oppose the implementation of the closure plans at Trafford General Hospital.



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