

SEP (UK) candidate: Oppose attacks on National Health Service workers' pay

Ajitha Gunaratne—candidate of the SEP (UK) for the European elections
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fielding a slate of eight candidates for the upcoming European elections on May 22 in England's North West constituency, which includes the cities of Manchester and Liverpool. It is running a joint campaign with the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) in Germany, where the elections are scheduled for May 25. Below is a statement issued by SEP candidate Ajitha Gunaratne, who works in the National Health Service.

The Socialist Equality Party and NHS FightBack call on National Health Service (NHS) workers to reject the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government's claims that there is no money to increase wages. No faith should be placed in the trade unions, which give only lip service to defending the pay and conditions of workers, while collaborating with the government to implement one attack after another.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt has thrown aside the recommendations of the NHS Pay Review Body for just a meagre 1 percent below inflation pay rise for nearly half of the NHS's 1.3 million workforce, on the grounds this would lead to job cuts and could damage patient care. Those at the top of their pay bands will get a 1 percent pay rise for two years, but this will not be added to their annual salary or count towards pensions or payments for working unsocial hours. By denying the pay rise, the government hopes to save £200 million in 2014-15 and £400 million in 2015-16.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron defended Hunt's decision, saying, "It is right to take those difficult decisions because it means we can keep more people employed, we can keep more people in work, and make sure we spend money on vital treatments, on hospitals, on delivering services, which is what patients so badly want."

No one should be deceived by these crocodile tears about "vital treatments", "hospital services", "patient care" and "staff jobs". They come from a government that has implemented drastic austerity measures against the working class while bailing out and enriching the super-rich since the global economic crisis erupted in 2008. It has ruthlessly implemented the plans of the previous Labour government to cut £20 billion from the NHS budget by 2015, which has decimated patient care by shutting down hospitals, children heart units, Accident and Emergency departments, maternity units and walk in centres. It plans to extend the funding cuts to £30 billion by 2021.

In 2012, this government brought the Health and Social Care Act into place, aimed at the wholesale privatisation of the NHS by replacing the previous "duty to provide comprehensive health care" with "duty to arrange". In 2013, £65 billion of the NHS budget was transferred to Clinical Commissioning Groups run by GP consortium, allowing them to buy care from any provider—private or NHS. More recently, the government inserted Clause 119 to the Care Bill in order to shut down hospitals, special units or departments without consultation and impunity.

The impact of the drastic cuts to funding has seen 39 of 147 Hospital Trusts in England saddled with a deficit of £180 million, with more and more hospitals struggling to survive. Thousands of NHS jobs, including frontline jobs, have been culled over the last four years.

In contrast to the coalition government's claims that NHS workers have been fairly treated, the reality is that they, like workers across the country, have seen a massive erosion of their real wages—up to 10 to 15 percent in recent years. Pay has been frozen for two years with pension contributions increased and pension

benefits slashed.

Tearing apart the lies about generous NHS pay is the fact that 39 percent of NHS workers are paid below £21,000 a year. Tens of thousands of these workers, on pay bands 1 and 2, including hospital porters, domestic workers and health care assistants, still do not receive a living wage, defined as £8.55 per hour in London and £7.45 outside the capital.

Many NHS workers are compelled to work extra hours—sometimes exceeding the European Union directive of a maximum of 48 hours a week—in the “Bank” (staff resource pool), under zero hour contracts or with other employers to make ends meet.

After allowing all these detrimental changes to occur over the last few years, the NHS unions—Unite, Unison, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and GMB—are now talking about industrial action. However, this is so much hot air. They have deliberately dodged preparations for industrial action since Hunt and the NHS employers’ organisation first revealed their intentions to deny a pay rise last October, putting forward calls, which have long proven to be bankrupt and totally ineffective, for health workers to organise petitions, write to MPs and take part in photo events.

Unison is asking its members to “get set to make a noise about the NHS pay” whilst the RCN say their members should contact their MPs “so that they understand the strength of feeling among nursing staff.” Unite’s head of health, Rachael Maskell, has the audacity to blame female NHS workers for their predicament, writing cynically that the government “has made a calculation that NHS workers, predominantly women, and all dedicated to their patients (although they fail to say that bit), will bear the sacrifice for another year or two, moan, but then get on with their work.” The truth, Ms. Maskell, is that the government has made a calculation that you and your union will continue to betray NHS workers interspersed with the occasional “moan”.

Time and again, NHS workers have displayed their desire to fight back, including the mass opposition in 2011 against cuts to pensions. One by one the unions capitulated. When NHS employers in south west England combined in a cartel to force through changes to pay and conditions in the region, the unions responded in 2012 by agreeing a rotten deal nationally—the introduction of performance-based

incremental progression, an end to sickness absence enhancements, getting rid of the recruitment and retention premium and removal of accelerated pay progression for pay band 5 workers, including nurses, physiotherapists and radiographers.

The Socialist Equality Party and its initiative NHS FightBack calls on NHS workers to form action committees, independent of the unions, to launch a genuine political struggle against attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions and to defend the NHS based on a socialist strategy. These action committees must fight to mobilise patients, hospital staff and workers and youth whose lives and health are being jeopardised under these attacks.

The problem is not a lack of funds or resources, but the monopoly of wealth by the super-rich. This monopoly can only be broken by a mass movement of the working class to bring down the coalition government and replace it with a workers government based on socialist policies. We call on workers to support the campaign of the SEP in elections to the European Parliament on May 22, vote for our candidates and join our party.



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