

UK psychologists campaign against cuts and social inequality

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In August, British psychologists organised a five-day “Walk the Talk” march, to protest against budget cuts and social inequality and the effects they have on mental health.

The marchers started at the offices of the British Psychological Society in Leicester and ended at the society’s headquarters in the centre of London, interviewing people at food banks and support centres along the way.

March organiser, Dr. Stephen Weatherhead, told the *Guardian*, “I work in brain injury and it’s been stressful to see the effect the benefits system has, with patients being pushed through traumatic assessments or being pressured into work when they’re not ready.”

He continued, “People’s psychological experience is exacerbated by their social situation. Some people are really struggling to feed their families, or worrying about whether they can pay their heating bills over the winter. Their debts are mounting up and they’re not able to find a way out.”

The *WalktheTalk2015.org* web site states that there is “a momentum growing amongst psychologists who are pressing for social inequalities to be addressed.” It criticises the fact that the UK is now the second most unequal country in the world. Over a quarter of children, some 3.5 million, live in poverty and the use of food banks has increased fivefold since 2010.

The web site reports that psychologists are seeing growing numbers of parents unable to take their children to therapy centres because of the cost of travel, that more individuals with significant disabilities are being told they are “fit for work” and there is increasing emotional distress, caused primarily by poverty and material deprivation. Services are under greater pressure and less able to provide support, with more families and children living in temporary accommodation and unable to get scarce affordable social housing, contributing to mental

health problems.

In a statement of values on the web site, the psychologists say they want to build an “increased presence within existing power structures,” urge policymakers to “consider the wider systemic implications of proposed changes to health and economic policy” and call for “the media stigmatisation of those in conditions of deprivation and poverty to end.”

The statement of values and the movement of UK psychologists is an attempt at initiating a democratic debate over the relationship between social inequality and health care. Albeit a sincere and welcome effort, it cannot develop effectively in the interests of workers or those accessing health services unless the profit motive in society is challenged.

Putting pressure on the authorities or working within the existing power structures will lead nowhere. The National Health Action Party (NHAP), founded in 2013, recognised that “Clinical excellence and democratic process mean nothing to this government,” but ended up pledging only to “insist the most damaging parts of the Government’s NHS [National Health Service] legislation are repealed.”

On its web site the NHAP states, “The National Health Action Party is a political party formed by doctors, nurses, paramedics, patients and families, who’ve come together to defend and improve the NHS. We’re not interested in party politics. We want to represent the interests of NHS on the political stage. We need you to help us save the NHS for future generations. If we don’t fightback now, we’ll lose it.”

Firstly, it is a political party, but then it does not have an interest in party politics. From this position it wants to represent the interests of the NHS. The result challenges neither the government as it keeps implementing its programme of cuts unhindered, nor the Labour Party, which helps make sure this happens without opposition.

As the NHS Fightback, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, explains, the ruling elite will not be satisfied until they have destroyed all the gains and conditions won by the working class. The economic crisis that began in 2008 made clear how successive governments enabled the super-rich to plunder social wealth, rig markets and cook the books. Having spent billions of pounds bailing out the banks and super-rich at taxpayers' expense, governments in every country are imposing vicious austerity measures. Their aim is to use the economic crisis to carry through a social counterrevolution against living standards and vital social provisions.

Greece is the most graphic example of this offensive. Despite Syriza being elected in January on promises to end EU austerity—and an overwhelming 61 percent rejecting austerity in a referendum called by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras—Tsipras agreed to the savage July 13 EU austerity package in a manner that transforms Greece into a semi-colony of the European Union. A similar process is underway in every country, including Britain, where the Conservative Party and the previous coalition have implemented the most draconian austerity measures since the 1930s.

As NHS Fightback insists, “The defence of health care and every other basic social right can only be taken forward through a break from the unions and the Labour Party. Action committees must be formed by patients, hospital staff and the workers and youth whose lives and health are being jeopardised.” The problem is not a lack of funds or resources, but the monopoly of wealth by the super-rich. NHS Fightback explains that this “monopoly can only be broken by a mass movement of the working class to bring down” the government “and replace it by a workers’ government based on socialist policies”.

“Such a government would carry through a radical redistribution of wealth in favour of working people, which would include ending the obscenity of medicine-for-profit and restoring the health service as a free, high quality state-run facility for all.”



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