

UK: Thousands march in Leeds to oppose attacks on National Health Service

Robert Stevens, Our reporters
21 April 2016

Several thousand people demonstrated Saturday in Leeds on the “Yorkshire March for the NHS,” including a contingent of junior doctors currently in dispute with the government over the imposition of an inferior contract.

The protest was called by Keep Our NHS Public (KONP) and there were banners from Unison, the British Medical Association (the junior doctors’ organisation) and the GMB unions, as well as the Labour Party and Green Party.

West Yorkshire is a county with a population of 2.2 million and the NHS in the region is being devastated due to huge cuts. In the towns of Huddersfield and Dewsbury, accident and emergency units are being shut and maternity units are closing. In York, the city’s only public adult mental health hospital was closed last October, with just five days’ notice.

A number of those attending the march brought homemade banners with slogans including, “Protect our Doctors—Protect the NHS” and “Public Health NOT Private Wealth”.

The Leeds event was prominently advertised on the Trades Union Congress web site. However, the trade unions have not lifted a finger to prevent a single attack on the NHS from going through. Hundreds of protests against closures and cuts since 2010 have been localised, isolated and defeated. The Conservative government’s Health and Social Care Act, laying the basis the privatisation of the NHS, was passed with barely a whimper from the unions, including Unison, which has nearly half a million members employed in the NHS.

The role of Keep Our NHS Public is to ensure that any fight back remains within the stranglehold of the Labour Party and the trade unions. It is pledged to work towards the election of a Labour government.

It was Labour that began the process of opening up the NHS for privatisation under the Blair/Brown governments from 1997 to 2010. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader has not resulted in any change in its treacherous record. Labour refuses to officially support the junior doctors’ strike, which has widespread public support, and has confined itself to criticising the government for provoking a protracted industrial dispute.

Last week, 40 representatives from Keep Our NHS Public and a “wide range of campaigning groups” met with Corbyn’s closest ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, along with Labour Shadow Health Secretary, Heidi Alexander, in Parliament. A summary of the meeting noted that Alexander refused to back an NHS Bill, restoring the NHS as a publicly owned body. According to the summary, Alexander “saw the Bill as possibly creating turmoil.”

Asked if Labour would table an NHS Bill in the next session of parliament, the summary notes that Alexander “said that Labour could not change legislation at this point because Labour did not have a majority in the House of Commons.”

In the meeting Keep Our NHS Public said Labour MPs should visit and support the picket lines of striking junior doctors. In response, the summary notes, “HA [Alexander] said she had not been on a picket line and did not plan to be. She thought that a large number of people would not expect to see the Shadow Secretary of Health on a picket line.”

The summary notes that the KONP told the Labourites, “We have hundreds of years of experience, in this room alone. We can advise you on policy far better than you are currently being advised.” KONP representative Joe Ryle said that John McDonnell “was committed to an ongoing relationship” and “A think

tank should be established to advise John.”

Members of the Socialist Equality Party campaigned at the Leeds protest with the NHS FightBack statement, “Junior doctors face political fight to save National Health Service,” which was well received.

Ryan said, “It is pretty disgusting the whole idea of privatising the NHS. They are squeezing the staff, by reducing their wages in real terms, in favour of cutting taxes for big corporations, in favour of private enterprises taking over.

“It’s a very sad situation that we’ve got to argue between paying nurses their wages or allowing companies to pay less tax, so they can create these so-called jobs. We’ve already got people that have jobs—they need paying equitably for it.

“We are being treated like idiots. We are told that everything is getting better, we are told that the country is improving. But when you can see junior doctors and nurses—and NHS staff in general—revolting, going against the word of the government saying, ‘No, this is not OK,’ you can see what is really going on, and it is appalling.”

On the revelations of tax avoidance contained in the Panama Papers, Ryan said, “That is a disgrace. Money is getting diverted from British tax funds to benefit rich individuals, just a few people. We are being told we are all in this together, but when the political leaders of the country are involved and complicit in tax avoidance, it shows the complete hypocrisy of it all. We are not all in it together. They in their group are all together, but we are very much left aside.

“It is getting clearer and clearer that the world is not run for the benefit of ordinary people, it is run for the benefit of the monied class, the people who stand to benefit substantially from these decisions. All we want to be able to do is live a normal life—live in a house, pay rent and buy food—but for the rich that is a stretch too far.”

Daniel said, “I wanted to come down here and express my support for the NHS. As a country that is one of the richest in the world, it is fair that people who are vulnerable should have access to affordable health care. There is more than enough capital to cover that. It has been proven to be the case, if it wasn’t being undermined as it is.”

Privatisation of health care “would be a huge step backwards, he said. “People come from all over the

world to study the NHS and learn from it. The way that it is going is a massive shame. Who is going to benefit from this? It is providing health care for the most vulnerable in our society, who would otherwise be unable to afford it. I think that is the measure of a society, how it treats people who would otherwise be left for dead. A return to an insurance-style system would be a tragedy.”

Rose said, “I have been working in operating theatres in the NHS for around eight years. I do the scrubbing up and related preparation. I have seen a lot of things change during that time. People are more tired and stressed than they used to be. I am here to oppose the running down of the health service and to voice my opposition to the lowering of standards.”

For further information visit: nhsfightback.org



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