

UK: The fight to defend the NHS means building a new socialist party

Statement by NHS FightBack

4 March 2017

Thousands are marching today in London in defence of the National Health Service (NHS). They represent the millions around the country opposed to the destruction of the NHS and who want to defend the right to free and universal public health care.

However, this is only the latest of many demonstrations in defence of the NHS. And each one is held under conditions of a worsening crisis, as health care is starved of funds in an act of deliberate sabotage. This is to better pave the way for the privatisation of profitable sectors, the introduction of a possible insurance-based scheme as a form of rationing and the destruction of vast swathes of chronic health care, including geriatric services.

The destruction of the NHS is being carried out through “Sustainability and Transformation Plans,” under which fully £26 billion of vital resources will be removed from the NHS by 2021. One in six of the UK’s 175 accident and emergency departments face being closed or downgraded in the next four years.

By the time of the 2020 General Election, virtually nothing will be left to defend of an NHS that will have suffered more than £40 billion in cuts in a decade.

Public health systems, along with the right to education and social housing, are being dismantled all over the world. In January, the British Red Cross said the NHS was facing a “humanitarian crisis,” just as it said of Greece—the country that is the European Union’s experiment in imposing savage levels of austerity. The ideological and commercially driven basis of this offensive by the Tory government was epitomised by one of its ideologues, Karol Sikora, who denounced the NHS on the BBC’s “Newsnight” as “the last bastion of communism,” requiring a “plethora of private providers to enter” and the introduction of a

user-pays system.

Today’s protest has been called by the Health Campaigns Together coalition and the People’s Assembly and has the backing of national trade unions, including Unite, Unison, the GMB and the British Medical Association (BMA). The People’s Assembly is backed by the Trades Union Congress and includes the Green Party, Counterfire, the Communist Party of Britain, Left Unity and the Stop the War Coalition.

All these organisations will correctly blame the “Tories” for bringing the NHS to the brink of destruction, but they will not and cannot explain how this has been allowed to happen.

Political responsibility rests with the Labour Party and the trade unions.

It was the pro-capitalist, right-wing Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown which paved the way for the coming to power of the Tories. In office from 1997 until 2010, Labour laid the groundwork for the destruction of the NHS by the widespread use of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), first introduced by the Tories as a means of transferring wide areas of the public sector to private corporations. Through the building of new hospitals under PFI, a colossal slice of government funds was handed over to the banks, with hospital trusts burdened with a massive £65 billion in total repayment costs. The aim was to hand over all “non-core” services to private corporations, with only clinical services remaining with the NHS.

None of this was opposed by the trade unions—who only ever verbally protested Labour’s policies, while at all times urging support for the Labour government.

Even after the formation of the Conservative/Liberal Democrats coalition, nothing fundamentally changed.

In 2012, with no opposition from Labour under Ed Miliband, the Tories passed the Health and Social Care Act, which finally ended the duty of the health secretary of the day to “provide” health care for all in the UK. Instead, the health secretary’s duty is now to “arrange” provision, so as to allow the private sector to take control.

Eighteen months ago, there was an attempt by hundreds of thousands of people to oppose this “New Labour” agenda and initiate a fight back. Workers and young people flocked into the Labour Party to elect Jeremy Corbyn as leader, not because of any specific policy he put forward, but because he was seen as an opponent of the Blairites.

Today, Corbyn will be given pride of place on the platform of speakers and all those in attendance will be told to place their hopes on the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government in 2020. The reality is that in the 18 months since his election, Corbyn has done nothing to oppose the Blairites, or the Tory government with which they are in a de facto alliance—without which there can be no defence of the NHS.

Time after time, Corbyn has placed “party unity” above political principle. He even put the Blairites in his shadow cabinet, where they mounted an attempted coup to get rid of him. On every programmatic question, moreover, he ceded the initiative to his opponents—granting a free vote on war in Syria, on replacing Trident and even instructing Labour councils to implement Tory cuts.

Last year, 50,000 junior doctors struck against a rotten contract imposing seven-day working with no additional funding. Corbyn, in alliance with the trade unions, played a major role in the isolation and eventual defeat of the junior doctors. He made one appearance on a picket line in April, but only while placidly calling for the government to reach a negotiated settlement with the BMA. This allowed the government the time required to concoct a dirty deal with the BMA—on whose junior doctors committee Corbyn supporters had leading positions—enabling the inferior contract demanded by the Tories to be imposed last December.

Following Labour’s defeat in the Copeland by-election, the Blairites are seeking once again to remove Corbyn. Yet the coup plotters, the acolytes of Blair and Peter Mandelson—who has declared, “I work every

single day to bring forward the end of [Corbyn’s] tenure in office”—sit unchallenged as Labour MPs, councillors and union officials.

On Thursday, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell responded with a pathetic overture, stating that he was, “[H]olding out hands from my wing of the party, from Momentum we established, to those people in [the Blairite think tank] Progress. And, yes, Peter Mandelson.” Whatever the verbal pledges made regarding the NHS by Corbyn, McDonnell and various union leaders, their sincerity should be measured against their readiness to ally with such open enemies of the working class. They should be expelling them from the Labour Party but are instead, once again, calling for unity.

The election of Corbyn has not made an iota of difference to the character of Labour as a party of big business, austerity, militarism and war.

Health workers and all those who want to fight in defence of the NHS must now undertake to build a new leadership, which fights on the basis of a socialist programme. In 2012, the Socialist Equality Party initiated the NHS FightBack campaign to take forward such a struggle among health workers and throughout the working class.

Contact us today at NHS FightBack.



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