

UK: Up to 250,000 protest attacks on National Health Service

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Up to 250,000 people demonstrated in London on Saturday in defence of the National Health Service (NHS).

The NHS is being systematically decimated, after nearly a decade of cuts in which more than £40 billion is being slashed from its budget. Such is the scale of the attacks being carried out against public health care, that in January the British Red Cross described the situation facing the NHS as a “humanitarian crisis.”

The demonstration was called by the Health Campaigns Together coalition and the People’s Assembly, with the backing of national trade unions, including Unite, Unison, the GMB and British Medical Association. The People’s Assembly is backed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Green Party and an assortment of Stalinist and pseudo-left outfits.

The protest was far larger than the organisers anticipated. That the event was so much larger demonstrates that broad layers of working people, youth, students and pensioners are determined to defend the NHS from cuts and privatisation. The *Daily Mail*, which along with other right-wing newspapers routinely plays down the size of demonstrations, described Saturday’s event as “one of the biggest NHS rallies in history.”

Health workers and members of the public attended from every major town and city in the UK, including London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Preston, Nottingham, Southampton, Portsmouth, Norwich, Cambridge, Derby, Brighton, Bristol, Exeter, Stoke, Newcastle, Carlisle, York and the Isle of Wight. (see: NHS protesters ask: “Why have we got money for war? Where is the money for our NHS and schools?”)

Many of those marching carried official demonstration placards with the slogans, “Our NHS”

and “No Cuts, closures, privatisation, pay restraint.” The placards also included a statement from Anuerin Bevan, the Labour MP who inaugurated the NHS in 1948, reading, “The NHS will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it.”

Large numbers attended with their own homemade banners with a range of slogans, including many that linked the onslaught on the NHS to other attacks on working people. One read, “My education is under attack, my health is under attack, my future is under attack.” Another read, “No More Austerity—No Cuts.” Other slogans, including “NHS not Trident,” opposed spending the resources of society on war and demanded it be spent on health, education and housing.

A number of demonstrators were supporters of the many local campaigns that have sprung up to oppose the closure of vital health services facilities. Others brought placards denouncing the government’s “Sustainability and Transformation Plans,” which are the means by which tens of billions in cuts are being imposed in 44 areas of England. “Stop STP—Save the NHS,” one proclaimed, and another, “Death by STP—5 year NHS Cuts Plan.”

The rally assembled in London’s Tavistock Square, before marching through the capital and passing Trafalgar Square, with bystanders crowding pavements to show their support. It continued down Whitehall and passed the prime minister’s Number 10 Downing Street residence on its way to the main rally in Parliament Square. Uniformed police officers stood behind barriers as the marchers passed the Department of Health building.

At the head of the march were Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey and Public and Commercial Services union leader Mark Serwotka. They and the speakers on

the main stage offered no strategy to fight the onslaught against the NHS.

Keynote speaker and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's speech consisted of a series of truisms about the NHS that not even Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May could openly disagree with. "Whatever you do in the health service, thank you, because every day you contribute to what is the most civilised institution in this country," he said. Alluding to the biblical tale of the Good Samaritan, he added, "Defending the NHS is defending a basic human value and a basic human right. You don't walk by on the other side when somebody is in difficulties or needing help."

Citing Bevan's statement to loud applause and cheering, Corbyn told the rally, "We've got the faith, we've got the fight and we are up for it!" Yet he offered no basis on which health service workers could conduct any fight against the government's attacks.

Corbyn said the crisis wracking the NHS "is the fault of a government who have made a political choice." "The money's there," he said.

On this basis, he made no appeal to mobilise the working class against the Tories, but instead appealed to Chancellor Philip Hammond to use next week's Spring Budget to guarantee funding for the NHS and for social care.

To render Corbyn's bromides more palatable, Serwotka, McCluskey, Communications Workers Union leader Dave Ward and McDonnell made more demagogic speeches, as they fraudulently claimed that the unions were involved in a determined fight to defend the NHS.

Serwotka stated that NHS workers had suffered seven years of pay cuts with many leaving in search of better jobs as they were unable to pay bills and make ends meet. He then called on the government to offer a pay rise, declaring that it was "long overdue that the trade unions and the TUC [Trades Union Congress] do something about the resolution we agreed unanimously [at the TUC's Congress] in September, which is to get all public sector workers to campaign against the pay cuts and to take action together."

Serwotka concluded by urging everyone to support Corbyn.

McCluskey concluded by stating, "Our message to the private health companies ... is a simple one, keep out

of our NHS, you thieving Tory bastards."

Ward said, "When we say the NHS is in a crisis, it's in intensive care and the Tories are getting away with murder."

In full rhetorical flow, he concluded, "We are going to take back control of the NHS. What about taking back control of the railways? What about taking back control of the postal industry, the telecommunication industries? What about taking back control of workplaces ... come on everybody, rise up."

Many of the speakers referred to last year's struggle carried by 50,000 junior doctors, who struck repeatedly in unprecedented action against the government insistence that they accept an inferior contract. McDonnell said in his speech, "We owe a debt of honour to the junior doctors who took action last year. They were fighting to save the NHS. ... If industrial action takes place over pay, whether it's in Parliament or on the picket line, Jeremy and I will be with you. And if we have to take to the streets we will." Labour had created the NHS and it would be a "Labour government under Jeremy Corbyn that restores the NHS."

Such statements are lies. Corbyn and McDonnell, despite a token attendance at the picket lines of junior doctors "in a personal capacity," did nothing to mobilise Labour members and supporters in defence of the doctors, and instead urged a negotiated settlement be reached by Tory Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Neither did the trade union bureaucracy lift a finger in opposition to these attacks, ensuring that the junior doctors suffered a defeat and in so doing once again cleared the path for the attacks that have followed.



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