

As thousands demonstrate in London in defence of health care

UK unions and Labour suppress struggle to defend National Health Service

Robert Stevens
5 February 2018

Around 40,000 to 60,000 people demonstrated in London Saturday in defence of the National Health Service (NHS).

The demonstration, headlined, “NHS in crisis—Fix it Now,” was organised by the People’s Assembly and the Health Campaigns Together coalition.

The march assembled in Gower Street, with protesters marching through central London to Downing Street where a rally was held.

The People’s Assembly is backed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the UK’s two largest trade unions—Unite and Unison—the Green Party and an assortment of Stalinist and pseudo-left groups.

Health Campaigns Together unites various local initiatives in defence of the NHS.

The march was significantly smaller than a demonstration called last March by the same organisations, which attracted up to 250,000 people. The lower participation does not represent any lessening of hostility to the government’s ongoing destruction of public health care. The march was held under conditions of an ongoing “winter crisis,” which has seen many people denied basic health care and scores of people dying due to a lack of basic funding and resources. Many who attended brought their own homemade banners in protest at the cuts and demanded more funding for the NHS and an end to its privatisation.

The main reason for the decline in numbers was twofold.

Despite the pledges by the trade union bureaucracy to organise a “fight” in defence of the NHS, they have not lifted a finger as the government has intensified its attacks. Many workers did not attend as they have

concluded that the unions will not mobilise to defend anything. In 2016, the British Medical Association, agreed a sell-out deal imposing an inferior contract on tens of thousands of striking junior doctors. The doctors had widespread support among other health workers and the working class for their struggle, but the betrayal of the BMA allowed the Tories to go on the offensive against the NHS.

The unions did virtually nothing to mobilise their membership in support of Saturday’s demonstration. Unison has around 500,000 members employed in the NHS, while Unite boasts of having has 100,000 members “across the health sector.”

The main demands of the organisers were based on pleas to the Conservative government, which has slashed tens of billions from the NHS budget since 2010, to fund the NHS properly. The call for the demonstration stated, “The Tories must heed the call of the public, staff and patients alike who demand that #ourNHS is not only funded properly but brought back into public hands away from the waste and demands of shareholders and bankers’ bonuses.”

In place of any recognisable national figures, the unions sent people to speak on their behalf who few will have heard of. Speaking on behalf of the Trades Union Congress was Paul Nowak, apparently the organisation’s deputy general secretary and before that its assistant general secretary. Speaking on behalf of Unison was one Helga Pile and for Unite, its “national officer” Sarah Carpenter.

Speaking on behalf of the Labour Party was Shadow Health Secretary, Jon Ashworth, who has held the position for just 15 months. He was sent because Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his advisers took the

decision that he should absent himself from the protest. Corbyn was featured at last year's demonstration as the keynote speaker and told the hundreds of thousands who attended, "We've got the faith, we've got the fight and we are up for it!"

This rhetoric was in reference to the statement of Aneurin Bevan, who inaugurated the NHS in 1948, that "The NHS will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it."

The People's Assembly and Health Campaigns Together maintain that the NHS can only be defended by the health unions, while the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government offers the only political road forward. On this basis, Ashworth was introduced as the representative of "the government in waiting."

In reality, the NHS has been brought to the brink of destruction by decades of attacks by successive Labour and Tory governments. The large-scale introduction of the Conservatives Private Finance Initiative (PFI) into the NHS—which pioneered its ongoing privatisation—was carried out by the 1997-2010 Labour government. In 2012, the Tories introduced the Health and Social Act—which removed the responsibility from the Health Secretary to provide a universal healthcare system in England. This has now been in place for six years.

A general election is not scheduled to be held until 2022, by which time there will be little left of the NHS to "fight" for, with more than £20 billion in additional "efficiency saving," i.e., savage cuts, set to be imposed.

Labour have no intention of lifting a finger in defence of the NHS. Rather, the prospect of a Labour government that will reverse all the attacks on the NHS is being used by Corbyn and his backers among the pseudo-left groups to dampen down and suppress any fightback based on the class struggle and a mass mobilisation of the working class.

Last year, Corbyn and his main ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, were greeted with genuine enthusiasm by workers who saw his rise to leadership as proof that a genuine fightback was being prepared after years in which Labour was dominated by the Blair and Brownite advocates of the market and privatisation.

A year on, Corbyn decided it was more important to address a meeting of party bureaucrats instead of the NHS rally. Instead of fight, workers have been told to wait until Corbyn is comfortably ensconced in Number

10.

Corbyn sent a brief video statement to protesters that was meant to be shown on the big screen at the rally's climax, but the organisers—who said it would be the only fitting end to the rally—could not get their act together in order to show it.

Had the protesters been given the opportunity to watch the video—which lasted just 90 seconds—they would have seen Corbyn offer a message that everyone was doing a grand job in protesting on a "cold winter's day."

Corbyn declared, "It can't have escaped anyone's notice that the NHS is in crisis," but offered nothing other than the prospect of an end to Tory rule in 2022. Declaring that Labour would fight for the NHS, he added that in government the party would "end the Tories' privatisation" and give the "NHS and its amazing staff the resources they need." Everyone should apparently "celebrate our wonderful National Health Service."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact