

The NHS 70th anniversary rally in London: A vote of no confidence in Labour and the trade unions

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Saturday's march to mark the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service (NHS) was attended by only around 10,000 people. This was far less than the up to 100,000 predicted by two of the March organisers—the Labour Party-supporting *Daily Mirror* newspaper and Britain's largest trade union, Unite.

The paltry attendance necessitated a damage limitation operation, with the People's Assembly—comprised of pseudo-left cheerleaders for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and one of the event's principal organisers—claiming that 40,000 and even 50,000 attended. Even were this the case, it was well down on predictions and far smaller than the rally in London in March 2017, called by the same organisations in defence of the NHS, which saw up to 250,000 attending.

Given that the destruction of the NHS and ongoing privatisation is the most important social issue for millions of Britons, the low attendance was proof that the unions and Labour both made very little effort to mobilise for the rally. Unison, the largest public-sector union, has 500,000 members in the NHS alone and well over a million overall. Unite, the UK's largest union with 1.4 million members, claims 100,000 members across the health sector.

However, more important than any organisational failings, indifference and complacency on the part of the organisers is that the rally proved to be a vote of no confidence by millions in the unions and Labour, which despite their occasional holiday speeches pledging to defend the NHS have not lifted a finger to prevent its evisceration. The NHS rally was the second national demonstration in successive months to be addressed by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Trades Union

Congress leader Frances O'Grady and attended by dwindling numbers. In May, they spoke to no more than 25,000 at the Trades Union Congress's (TUC) now sole annual protest in the capital.

This is part of an international phenomenon in which the established parties and institutions of the ruling elite are being met with disillusionment and growing hostility from their former working class social base. In the United States, the recent primary elections for the mid-term elections saw just 20 percent of those registered to vote take part. In the 14th Congressional District of New York, Democratic Socialists of America member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeated incumbent Democratic Party Representative Joe Crowley, with only around 13 percent of registered Democrats bothering to vote, demonstrated popular hostility towards the Democratic Party establishment.

The unions and Labour again offered nothing beyond a few worthless pledges, with O'Grady relying on an anecdote about her Irish mother having once been an NHS employee to emphasise that workers from all around the world are part of the NHS workforce. "Don't let any of those poisonous politicians who want to scapegoat migrant workers divide us. We are united," she said. Yet the TUC's policy is for immigration controls, as laid down last year by Owen Tudor, the body's head of European Union and international relations. He argued for the use of "creative means" to allow the UK to deliver "tighter policies than unfettered freedom of movement" while maintaining access to the Single Market, including restricting public-sector (i.e., NHS) jobs to people holding British citizenship and negotiating arrangements to limit the number of European

Economic Area nationals entering the country.

The levels of cynicism on display were staggering. Unison President Gordon McKay catalogued the attacks on the NHS before proclaiming, “Unison is saying no more. It stops now. Stand with us and defend the NHS. Stand up and fight on every case. And there will be 1.3 million Unison members fighting with you!”

Unison has sold out health workers repeatedly in the last decades. In 1995, Hillingdon Hospital domestic and catering workers were sacked by private contractor Pall Mall for refusing to accept a £40 per week wage cut and changed working conditions. They had to force Unison to make the strike official, but the union refused to call national action and tried to get them to return to work. The union ended backing for the strikers in 1997, though the strike continued unofficially until 1999.

Unison did nothing to mobilise in support of the most significant struggle by health workers for decades, when 50,000 junior doctors fought against the imposition of an inferior contract in 2016. The health unions’ isolation of the strike led to its defeat, after the British Medical Association collaborated in enforcing the contract.

In response to McKay’s comments, someone shouted from the audience asking why Unison was not calling out its members to back striking NHS workers in Wigan.

Labour Health Secretary Jon Ashworth said, “In the coming weeks in Parliament the Labour Party is working on putting forward a bill to end privatisation ... to restore, reinstate and renationalise our NHS.” Despite this rhetoric, Labour is not opposed to the private sector reaping profits from the NHS, with its 2016 manifesto stating only that the NHS should be the “preferred provider” of health care.

By the time Corbyn spoke to conclude the rally, the crowd had dwindled to a few thousand people gathered in Whitehall. He said that though the NHS was the creation of Labour MP Aneurin Bevan as Minister for Health in the post-war Attlee government, the “inspiration” came from the mining communities in south Wales, the Tredegar health campaigns and “from a belief in working class communities that they deserved the very best that health care could provide.”

Corbyn referred to the ethos of the NHS as “socialism in action.” “There have been huge attacks on our NHS

over many years,” he said. “The Tories voted against the original legislation and always sought to privatise and continue an internal market.”

As usual, Corbyn whitewashed the 1997 Tony Blair/Gordon Brown Labour government, which took the first major steps towards the privatisation of the NHS.

Corbyn said the 2012 Health and Social Care Act was “designed to break up our health service and turn it into a contracting agency for the private sector. I say ‘no.’ I want the NHS to be for the public, paid for and operated by the public and be in public hands.”

In full rhetorical flow, he continued, “We’re here today on this amazing 70th birthday, here in Whitehall, yes to celebrate, but do we have the absolute determination that we will go to the end of the earth and beyond to defend our National Health Service?”

For all the hyperbole, Corbyn’s answer was an emphatic “no.” He would lead no struggle to oppose the destruction of the NHS. All he offered was a series of “messages” to Prime Minister Theresa May and the Department of Health to stop privatising, to end the internal market and not to “con staff with a national pay agreement at the same time as you create the internal market to create internal employers in private companies within the NHS that think they are not bound by national pay agreements and conditions.”

The same Conservative government who have cut billions from the NHS should, moreover, “properly fund social care.”

“In the name of equality, in the name of justice, pay the social care needs that are necessary so people can live with dignity,” he pleaded with May.



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