

Bradford NHS workers to strike against “backdoor privatisation”

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24 July 2019

Hospital workers in Bradford, England will begin a two-week strike on August 1 against their transfer to a new company. Around 300 National Health Service (NHS) staff are set to strike against plans which they say amount to backdoor privatisation.

The two-week strike follows a week of industrial action that began on July 8, with strong and enthusiastic pickets mounted at the Bradford Royal Infirmary and St Luke’s Hospital.

NHS staff at Shipley Hospital and community hospitals in the Eccleshill, West Wood Park and Westbourne Green areas of Bradford, also joined the stoppage. On July 10, around 200 workers attended a rally where calls for further strikes were made. A Bhangra band joined the Bradford Royal Infirmary picket line and passing motorists tooted solidarity with the action.

The dispute was sparked when Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust announced plans in May to transfer around 600 of its staff to a subsidiary company wholly owned by the trust. The new company, Bradford Healthcare Facilities Management Ltd, is scheduled to operate from October this year. The company would be responsible for the trust’s estates, facilities and clinical engineering services. Among the workers affected would be porters, cleaners and security staff. Hospital workers fear the subsidiary company is merely a prelude to privatization.

The Unison trade union balloted over 300 members among the affected staff and the result announced in early June showed a 97 percent majority in favour of industrial action to oppose the proposals.

The trust hopes to save around £28 million over the next five years by establishing the wholly owned subsidiary or “subco.” It hopes to exploit a loophole in VAT regulation whereby subcos are not liable for

Value Added Tax payments in the way that National Health Service (NHS) trusts are. They also hope to save around £15 million over the same period from so-called operational “efficiencies.” Staff fear such a move would be a form of privatisation by the back door. They have no faith in statements by the trust that existing staff will have their pay and conditions of service, including pension rights, protected for the next 25 years.

The Bradford hospital trust’s plans are aimed at enforcing government-imposed efficiency cuts of 4 percent each year, around £16 million in the current financial year. The Tory government is committed to imposing efficiency savings of £20 billion in the NHS.

NHS Improvement (NHSI) is responsible for overseeing hospital trusts and ensuring they are financially sustainable. In November last year, it gave the go-ahead for trusts to set up subcos but introduced a raft of measures to ensure they represent “value for money.” Some trusts complained that the new guidance “sets the bar too high.”

Some hospital trusts have scrapped current plans to create wholly owned subsidiary companies or at least put them on hold until after a general election. Their concern is that a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government may end the VAT tax loophole making proposed subsidiary companies less viable. Labour has made calls for the loophole to be closed.

Speaking at the beginning of the strike, Unison regional organiser Natalie Ratcliffe stated, “We have urged the trust to scrap the plans, or at least shelve them, as there is likely to be a general election this year or next and the policy of establishing wholly owned subsidiaries is likely to be dropped.”

“Other trusts in the UK have dropped or shelved their plans, but the Bradford Trust seems hell-bent on

imposing this company on our members,” she said

The Patients4NHS, a pressure group opposed to NHS privatisation, has noted: “By March 2018, 42 Foundation Trusts (FTs) had either set up, or were in the process of setting up, subcos. This expansion may have been quietly prompted by NHSI. It also seems it’s been made easier by changes in legislation. The Health and Social Care Act (HSCA) of 2012 allowed FTs to sell off assets...”

The Bradford hospital trust is determined to push ahead with its plans for the subco. On July 18, the Bradford *Telegraph and Argus* newspaper cited a letter from the Unison Bradford Health Branch to members, making clear that “Following a week of solid industrial action by estates and facility staff, the Trust has refused to cease or even postpone its plans to transfer staff into the private company Bradford facility services.”

It continued, “The Trust stated in the meeting that they wish to look into ways of giving more assurances around terms and conditions but accepted that as yet they could not make guarantees that would legally prevent future changes to terms by lawfully terminating contracts and offering inferior ones.”

The striking hospital workers have shown an enthusiastic determination to prosecute their fight against the threat to their jobs and conditions, but they cannot put their trust in the unions or Labour for their defence.

While local Labour MPs, Judith Cummins, Naz Shah and John Grogan have attended the picket lines, along with Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary Jonathan Ashworth, their assurances of support are worthless.

The unions have presided over a relentless attack on health service jobs and conditions. The sell-out of the national junior doctors’ strike is just the most recent example. In September 2016, the British Medical Association that represented the doctors called off its dispute and the Conservative government imposed a contract the junior doctors had fought hard to oppose.

Last year, health unions including Unison called the government’s shoddy pay deal for health workers the “best deal in eight years.” Unison’s head of health and lead pay negotiator for NHS unions, Sara Gorton, said the deal “would go a long way towards making dedicated health staff feel more valued, lift flagging morale, and help turn the tide on employers’ staffing problems.” In reality the unions had worked with the

Conservative government to concoct a filthy sell out that was soon exposed when health workers got their payslips. Most health workers received only a 1.5 percent rise, with some earning just a few pence extra.

In September last year, a rebellion by Royal College of Nurses members at a special conference on that pay deal forced the RCN leadership to stand down.

In November 2011, over 2 million public sector workers held a one-day strike in opposition to government plans to make public sector workers pay more and work longer for a reduced pension. However, within weeks the main unions, including Unison, had abandoned any fight against the pension changes demanded by the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition.

The Bradford hospital workers must take the initiative out of the hands of Unison and reject their bogus claims that a Labour government will resolve the dispute in workers’ interests. Labour, both prior to Corbyn’s election and after, has done nothing to mobilise workers in support of these critical struggles against the Tory government and employers. Workers must build rank-and-file committees and turn out to build support among workers in Bradford and health workers throughout the NHS.



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