

UK: After the clapping stops—The way forward for NHS workers

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Last Thursday, the weekly Clap for Carers was held for the 10th time since it began on March 26. Its instigator, Annemarie Plas, a mother from London, asked that it be the last.

Plas said that Clap for Carers had become “too political ... I think the narrative is starting to change, and I don’t want the clap to be negative.”

The Clap, dressed up in the language of “national unity” behind “National Health Service heroes,” was always political. As so often in the past, a supposedly non-political approach made it ripe for appropriation by forces hostile to the working class, seeking to smother the essential political conflicts and opposed social interests thrown into such stark relief by the pandemic.

At the very first event, on the evening of March 26, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Health Secretary Matt Hancock all clapped along. Johnson, standing outside Number 10, looked sick because he was already infected with COVID-19. There is a strong likelihood that he could have contracted the illness a few weeks earlier while visiting a hospital and shaking hands with everyone he met—to “prove” that there was no need to implement measures to contain the virus, including supplying frontline workers with personal protective equipment (PPE).

That same evening, Johnson tweeted, “On behalf of the whole country, I want to thank all the incredible nurses, doctors, NHS support staff & carers who are working flat out to fight coronavirus.”

From the start, many were outraged at the sickening pretence that “we are all in this together.” Nancy Holiday replied to Johnson’s tweet, “You hypocrite! Give them the PPE they’ve been begging for weeks. And the ventilators. Stop lying to the country about how serious the situation is due to your dithering and delay.”

Another Twitter user wrote, “How about you get them the bloody testing kits, PPE and ventilators they need and give them a decent pay rise whilst you’re at it.”

Heather demanded, “Yes let’s #clapforNHS but what hypocrites you and your Govt are—you’ve run down the

NHS for 10 years and now you’ve found the Magic Money Tree and pretend you care. Actions speak louder than words. Get NHS staff proper PPE ASAP.”

Nevertheless, the Clap proceeded week after week as hundreds of thousands were infected and tens of thousands died with coronavirus due to the government’s “herd immunity” policy and refusal to impose a lockdown. The Tories continued to sing the praises of the NHS and other frontline carers after creating the conditions for the UK to become the European country worst hit by COVID-19, with the second-highest global death toll after the US.

With an intolerable burden placed upon them—seeing at least 312 of their colleagues die due to inadequate PPE, and care homes become killing fields—doctors and nurses were torn by a desire to publicly acknowledge the genuine sentiment of the millions clapping, while bristling at the sickening political hypocrisy running through proceedings like an open sewer.

Things came to a head last week because it has become impossible for the government to maintain the charade of unity behind “our carers.”

On May 10, Johnson had announced Phase One of a return to work. The appeal to “Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives,” gave way to declarations that the NHS had been saved and all that was now necessary was to “Stay Alert!” Two weeks later, Johnson declared that “Phase Two” would begin June 1 and would include the partial reopening of nurseries and primary schools.

Health workers know this will mean an inevitable spike in COVID-19 cases that will, by the autumn, likely dwarf what they have already faced so bravely. Thus, with the government and the media anxious to project the illusion of a “return to normality,” both sides of an undeclared class war decided that the clapping must stop.

Johnson and Hancock faced a barrage of opposition when they tweeted following the 10th Clap for Carers. Ma Simpsons wrote, “Stop clapping you’re killing people. Especially health care workers. Did you go speak to the ones at the end of Downing Street tonight protesting that they

weren't martyrs? No of course you didn't."

Maria Gilroy tweeted of Hancock, "Jog on! Your incompetence and lack of compassion has caused over 235 deaths of my health & social care colleagues. DeathSecretary hang your head in Shame! We will NEVER forgive you or Boris Johnson."

Another Twitter user spoke for many when summing up events: "The government hijacked #ClapForCarers #clapforNHS and cheapened it. Went from being a lovely gesture of solidarity, to Ministers using it as a weekly distraction from their failures, and the media was along for the ride. Let's say thanks to the NHS by stopping privatisation."

The class truce on which the Clap for Carers depended is over. Already on May 18, Hancock was asked if the government would sanction a nurses' pay rise. He replied that they had already had one—2018's deal with the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) trade union of 6.5 percent over three years that came after an eight-year pay freeze and was a de facto pay cut.

For over four decades, the NHS has been under constant attack by the ruling elite and their political representatives, Tory, Labour and Liberal Democrat. Over the last 10 years it was bled dry by more than £20 billion in "efficiency savings." Bed capacity has fallen by 30,000 and dozens of Accident and Emergency units have been shut down, as well as some hospitals. There were more than 110,000 unfilled posts in the NHS, including over 40,000 nursing vacancies, before the pandemic hit. Likewise, the slashing of funds to local authorities has resulted in deplorable care for the elderly and infirm and a low-wage and poorly equipped workforce struggling to cope.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

The interests of big business and working people are irreconcilably opposed. The ruling class is bitterly hostile to the notion of universal public health care, free at the point of use, and hates the NHS as the key element of the welfare reforms implemented after World War II to avert the threat of socialism. When the working class speaks of "Our NHS" they mean the service on which their lives, health and well-being depends. When the capitalist class speaks of "Our NHS," they mean a £140 billion goldmine ripe for privatisation and plunder.

The challenge that faces NHS workers is the development of an independent political struggle against the ruling class and its political defenders in the fight for socialism and a

workers government. To wage this fight, action committees must be established, independent from the trade unions, to safeguard the health and safety of doctors and nurses and to wage a political struggle for essential resources.

Public Health England (PHE) guidelines on PPE are in breach of World Health Organisation guidelines and must be rejected. COVID-19 is a High Consequence Infectious Disease and health care workers must be provided with full protective gear, including the necessary FFP1/FFP2 or FFP3 masks as the situation requires.

No health worker should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work unless adequate protection is provided.

All hospital closures must be stopped, and the dangerous shortage of bed numbers reversed. No patient should be denied access to treatment because of their age, frailty, disability or visa status. Elective surgeries, cancer treatment and investigations must resume in safe conditions. Staff and patient testing for COVID-19 must be made freely and immediately available, backed up by contact tracing and quarantining.

Privatisation and fragmentation of the NHS must be stopped immediately. All rooms allocated for private patients must be utilised to treat NHS patients. Privatised services must be taken back into the NHS.

Implementing this programme demands a massive injection of funds, paid for by taxing the super-rich and taking control of the major corporations, including Big Pharma, removing medical research and drug production from the constraints of private profit.

We call on NHS staff to contact the Socialist Equality Party to tell us your thoughts and begin to organise the necessary fightback in defence of the NHS and the social right to public health care for all.

For further information visit *NHS Fightback*: facebook.com/Fight4theNHS.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact