

Tories resurrect cynical “Clap for Carers” on 72nd anniversary of the NHS

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The Johnson government has announced that this Sunday will see the Clap for Carers reinstated to mark the 72nd anniversary of the National Health Service (NHS). They intend to establish an annual event.

The endorsement of the initiative by a rogues’ gallery of all five living former prime ministers underscores the cynicism of the occasion. Together with their successor, the Tories John Major, David Cameron, and Theresa May, and New Labour war criminals Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have collectively presided over a three-decades-long offensive against the NHS that has brought it to the brink of collapse. During the factional conflict over Brexit, Major famously declared that the NHS was about as safe in the hands of Johnson as a “pet hamster with a hungry python.”

Sunday’s “clap” is in fact a slap in the face for health and social care workers who have struggled to manage a crisis Johnson’s government created. It is a calculated insult to the memory of an estimated 400 health and care workers who died of COVID-19 trying to save the lives of others.

Clap for Carers came to an end after 10 weeks because workers could no longer stomach the sickening hypocrisy of participating government ministers. What began as a spontaneous act of popular solidarity has now been co-opted by the ruling class, turned into a vehicle for lecturing the workers on the importance of “national unity,” spreading the lie that “we are all in it together,” and providing a fig leaf to conceal the threatened collapse of the NHS.

The government has even raised the possibility of handing care workers medals, giving them the same treatment as the cannon fodder sent to be slaughtered in British imperialism’s wars abroad. As one intensive care nurse told a BBC *Panorama* documentary in April, “calling us heroes just makes it okay when we die.”

One thing not on offer is the money needed to properly fund a health and social care system and workforce that has been stretched past breaking point during the pandemic.

The last 10 years saw the lowest ever funding increase for the NHS in its existence, while the Health and Social Care Act brought in by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in 2012 facilitated an unprecedented looting of the service by private companies. Bed capacity was slashed by 30,000 and the number of Intensive Care Unit beds per thousand people reduced to one of the lowest ratios in Europe. Stocks of personal protective equipment were reduced by 40 percent from 2013. The workforce has been cut to the point where the NHS is suffering more than 110,000 vacancies.

This fragile structure was then hit with the hammer blow of a pandemic—predicted and warned about for years—but turned into a national catastrophe by Johnson’s deadly policy of “herd immunity” allowing the disease to run rampant for weeks.

Even this crisis has not halted attacks on the NHS. On May 18, Health Secretary Matt Hancock refused to consider a pay rise for nurses. A petition of more than 160,000 people demanding an increase forced parliament to debate the issue last week. Less than 20 MPs out of 650 showed up.

The same week, 331 Tory MPs voted down a motion to provide NHS workers with routine weekly testing. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) recently revealed that health and social care workers are significantly more likely to die of COVID-19. A Royal College of Nursing (RCN) survey found that 34 percent of nurses “say they’re still under pressure to care for patients with possible or confirmed COVID-19 without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).”

Doctors Association UK (DAUK), the Good Law Project, and the Hourglass charity have launched a legal challenge against the government for failing to instigate an inquiry into health and social care worker deaths.

Two weeks ago, the government tried to prematurely terminate the contracts of student nurses who opted to work for NHS for six months and provide assistance during the pandemic. It was only after a massive public outcry, and a petition of more than 182,000 people, that the government agreed to honour the contracts. They were forced into a similar U-turn over waiving Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) for NHS workers from overseas, but reports show that non-EU workers are still being forced to pay.

In a speech on Tuesday promising a “New Deal,” Johnson pledged just £1.5 billion for hospital maintenance and construction—less than one quarter of the £6.5 billion maintenance backlog faced by UK hospitals.

Now the NHS is to be plunged into a worse catastrophe than ever before by Johnson’s premature ending of the lockdown and drive to reopen the economy. The day before the “clap” for the NHS, July 4, has been dubbed as the UK’s own “Independence Day” and “Super Saturday,” with emphasis on the opening of pubs. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine, warned, “The NHS has coped admirably during this period, but staff are exhausted, and the system is very fragile... it would be heartbreaking to see A&Es overwhelmed on the first post-lockdown evening by people who have gotten too drunk or been in a fight.”

The opening of factories, schools, and beaches, has already led to a surge in infections in towns and cities throughout the UK, including London, that has already necessitated a local lockdown in Leicester.

The second phase of the pandemic will have devastating consequences, especially with the onset of the winter flu season that last November meant bed occupancy rates of 95 percent. Professor Sir John Bell, regius professor of Medicine at Oxford University, has warned of “pandemonium” in A&E departments in the event of a second wave of coronavirus overlapping with a bad flu outbreak.

There is also an immense backlog of NHS treatments postponed during the pandemic, with the NHS waiting

list expected to rise from 4.2 million currently to about 10 million by Christmas. Around 28,000 heart procedures have been delayed since the beginning of the lockdown, while Cancer Research estimated that 23,000 cancers have gone undiagnosed and that 2.4 million people are waiting for screening, treatment or tests.

Around 100,000 people have so far needed hospital care for COVID-19 in England alone. An estimated 20-30 percent are showing some level of long-term lung damage, leaving them more susceptible to chest infections.

This will put impossible pressures on an already exhausted healthcare workforce, with increased incidences of stress, anxiety, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress disorder being reported.

The catastrophe facing the NHS and the working class which depends on it can only be resolved by a massive injection of resources into all aspects of health and social care. But the necessary resources can only be made available through a seizure of the profits and assets of the major corporations and banks and the immediate removal of private, profit-seeking enterprises from the NHS.

Such a demand is anathema not only to the Tories, but also the Labour Party. Labour’s Sir Keir Starmer and company have spent all their time and energy defending the government and have ruled out any measures to address social inequality or funding shortages. For their part, the trade unions that have allowed the NHS to be destroyed piecemeal for decades are colluding every day with the government and the employers in the same rotten role as policemen of any opposition that develops in the workforce.

The life-and-death question of defending and expanding the NHS falls to the working class, acting in its own interests through building independent action committees. These committees must take up a socialist political struggle to safeguard the health and safety of doctors and nurses and secure the resources needed for a fully functioning healthcare system.



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