

Defend lives and protect the National Health Service: Build rank-and-file committees of health workers!

NHS FightBack
2 July 2021

Nurses, doctors and their co-workers taking part in events marking the 73rd anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service (NHS) will know they face a triple threat to their lives and livelihoods:

- A new wave of the pandemic has already begun, fuelled by the highly infectious Delta variant, under conditions where all measures of containment and social distancing will be abandoned on July 19. Whatever the restraining impact of the still only partially completed vaccination drive, illness, hospitalisations and deaths will rise dramatically by the autumn with those in younger age groups impacted.

- NHS workers confront a Conservative government indifferent to the impact of the pandemic on working people, having presided over 150,000 deaths already. This includes 1,500 health/care workers, as admitted by former Health Secretary Matt Hancock before he was forced to resign in disgrace. Hancock claimed that no one had died due to shortages of PPE, a lie refuted by a trial at Addenbrooke's hospital, Cambridge that found using FFP3 respirators rather than the cheap masks recommended by Public Health England led to a fall of up to 100 percent in staff infections. Every death in a health and social care setting was due to Tory cuts.

- Led by new Health Secretary Sajid Javid, Boris Johnson's government of criminals is planning a frontal assault on the NHS. Having proffered an insulting one percent pay rise, the plan is now to escalate the Tory privatisation drive. A quarter of total NHS spending already goes to the private sector, and much more if the billions of pounds worth of contracts

handed out by the Tories to their cronies during the pandemic are factored in. A new White Paper on the NHS seeks to make competitive tendering easier, with any company denied contracts able to seek a judicial review and all "unnecessary hurdles" removed to allow patients "to choose treatment" from any company that is "competent to carry it out and meets NHS prices."

The NHS has already been brought to the brink of disaster. There are 4.5 million people now on waiting lists, and nearly 225,000 people have waited more than a year for routine hospital treatment, the highest level in 12 years. In the face of this health disaster, there are currently more than 87,000 staff vacancies in the NHS and the workforce is suffering from the enormous physical and psychological pressure of the pandemic, including from Long Covid. The attacks now being planned will make this disastrous situation even worse.

In the face of this, health workers confront a further crisis. They are led by trade unions that will do nothing to defend them from the Tory assault and are told to rely on a Labour Party that works in a de-facto government of national unity with Boris Johnson.

None of the health unions are organising a single protest against the ongoing destruction of the NHS. Monday's July 5 anniversary will instead witness the "NHS Social Care and Frontline Workers' Day", backed by right-wing newspapers such as the *Express* and the *Mail*, business figures and employers' associations and consisting of events such as "raising the flag", a two-minute silence and the playing of the Last Post, and a national memorial to Covid victims at St Paul's Cathedral. Health-workers will view such efforts to perpetuate the myth of "national unity" in

support of the NHS with deserved contempt, after already being subjected to weeks of the “Clap for Carers” while Johnson and his ilk allowed NHS and care staff to die and created the conditions where 300 attempted suicide during the pandemic.

Those looking to fight back against this tidal wave of hypocrisy are offered only Saturday’s NHS Day of Action protests, organised by various campaign groups gravitating around the Labour Party. In these protests pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party will make ritualistic calls on the trade unions to “Fight the Tories!”, and “lefts” such as ex-party leader Jeremy Corbyn will state their purely personal belief that Labour should also “Defend the NHS.”

The protest organisers have no independent perspective for leading an effective struggle on the issues they have identified: patient safety, pay justice and an end to privatisation. A statement by Health Campaigns Together (HCT), endorsed by Keep Our NHS Public, only asks the union bureaucracy to “invite HCT and other health campaign groups to the next summit of the health unions, to help develop a coordinated strategy to unite the staff with the public and push back against the government.”

Once the hot air evaporates, health workers will face the same open enemies and false friends as before. The health trade unions will continue to suppress and sabotage all opposition, as the British Medical Association did with the 2016 junior doctors’ strike, and the Royal College of Nursing did with the 2018 pay struggle by nurses.

The defence of the NHS cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions and their cheerleaders in the pseudo-left groups. The unions’ avowed aim to find “common ground” with the employers and government is a strategy for workers’ defeat.

The working class must act independently in defence of its own interests. For this, new organisations of struggle are required. Health and care workers should establish rank-and-file workplace committees, led by the most trusted workers and independent from the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party established the NHS FightBack campaign in 2012 to lead such an offensive. We urge healthcare workers to take up the following demands:

Halt the privatisation of the NHS—Facilities allocated for private patients must be utilised to treat NHS patients. Privatised services must be taken back into the NHS.

A substantial pay increase for all health/care workers—The loss in real wages must be restored and a substantial rise awarded to provide the low-paid with a liveable wage.

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

Stop all hospital cuts—All patients must have access to suitable treatment regardless of their age, frailty, disability, or visa status.

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.

NHS FightBack supports the call for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the fight for a socialist programme. All the resources of society must be placed in the hands of the working class and used for the benefit of all, not the enrichment of a few. Such a policy would see the NHS given the necessary billions of which it has been starved.

We urge all those who agree with this perspective to contact NHS FightBack and link up with our Facebook page.



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