

NHS “Day of Action”: How the UK unions and pseudo-left demobilise health workers

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A Day of Action was called across the UK on Saturday July 3 to mark the 73rd anniversary of the National Health Service and protest for “patient safety, pay justice and an end to privatisation.”

The demonstrations, organised by a collection of NHS campaign groups including Keep Our NHS Public and Health Campaigns Together, were joined by strikingly low numbers of people. In many major cities, fewer than 100 turned up, and attendance barely exceeded 200 even at the largest demonstrations.

Such an event cannot pass without political conclusions being drawn. The following Monday was given over to a series of nauseating events using the NHS to boost the myth of national unity, summed up by the Queen’s awarding the NHS the George Cross for its workers’ “courage, compassion and dedication”. That same evening, Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave the go ahead for the homicidal lifting of all public health measures on July 19, amid a terrible surge of the Delta variant and after a year in which NHS workers have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yesterday, the Conservative government announced its new misnamed Health and Care Bill, streamlining the privatisation of the NHS.

Amid this official hypocrisy and plans for death and destruction, Saturday’s Day of Action was the sole event organised with the declared aim of defending health care and health workers. Yet at most a few thousand people across the country turned out. The causes of this fiasco hold important lessons.

Despite enormous popular sentiment for a fightback, no real campaign was waged by the events’ organisers to mobilise the working class. Keep Our NHS Public, Health Campaigns Together, NHS Workers Say NO and NHS Staff Voices, backed by pseudo-left groups like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP), are wholly oriented to the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy, neither of which lifted a finger to build the protests.

According to the SWP, who are in a position to know, “All the main [union] leaders shrugged off invitations to join the demonstrations.” They add that leaders of the UK’s largest union, Unison, “went further and opposed the marches.”

This is made more remarkable given that a few weeks ago the

pseudo-left, including the SWP, were lauding a left takeover of Unison’s National Executive Committee. The SWP wrote, “The left has swept to control the national executive committee (NEC) of Unison for the first time since the union was created in 1993... There were 37 candidates elected who were part of the Time For Real Change slate... Socialist Worker supported this slate. In addition, four members of the Socialist Party won.”

The SP commented, “This is now the opportunity to show what a left leadership can do.” It was indeed.

Instead of taking part in an opposition protest, Unison’s head of health, Sara Gorton, attended a government-organised memorial service for health workers—killed in the pandemic by its policies—where she asked that “lessons be learned” so that “mistakes can never be repeated.”

Unison, along with the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), is a partner organisation of the Together coalition, which includes such allies as HSBC and NatWest banks and the *Sun* newspaper. The Coalition organised a Thank You Day for the NHS on Sunday July 4, encouraging people to “Join in an hour’s exercise”, “Take part in the UK’s Power Hour litter pick”, hold a “street party or picnic”, “Play or sing-a-long in a UK wide performance”, “raise a glass or a mug” and “Share a BBQ with your neighbours and friends”.

Both Unison and the Unite union used the actual date of the NHS anniversary, July 5, as an occasion to ask the Tory government for a pay rise as a “birthday present”.

This left a few regional officials to fulfil the thankless task of flying the flag for their unions at Saturday’s protests. The SP quotes newly elected member of Unison’s NEC Naomi Byron speaking at a protest in London but is forced to clarify that she did so “in a personal capacity”.

The conclusion drawn by the SWP from this debacle is that the protests “could have been many times bigger had health unions given them national backing” and that it is therefore “vital that health workers continue to show the union leaders the level of anger that exists. And that they keep pushing them for action.”

This begs two large questions.

First, *why* did the unions not give their national backing? The answer is that the corporatist labour police forces and management partners which still bear the name “unions” are

fundamentally indifferent to the fate of the working class. Staffed by well-paid bureaucrats, either unelected or elected on tiny turnouts, these organisations did not want to cut across their bankrupt policy of holding Johnson and his fellow criminals to their poisoned declarations of love for the NHS. Their overarching fear is of any genuine opposition movement developing among workers. This would not only cut across their own lucrative relations with NHS and corporate management and the state apparatus. It would of necessity have to turn its fire on the unions themselves, whose sellouts have created the pay and privatisation crisis in the health service.

Which leads to the second question: Given the unions' filthy record of betrayals, what would have been the result even if they had backed the call for action? In 2018, the Trades Union Congress national demonstration in London attracted at most 25,000 people. The previous year mobilised just 10,000. After a year in which every union has been complicit in exposing workers to the government's herd immunity policy of social murder, how many people would still be convinced by yet another empty pledge to "fight for the NHS"?

The same goes for the Labour Party, which also refused to back the protests. Former party leader Jeremy Corbyn, touted by the SWP and SP as the messiah for "left" Labourism, was also forced to address Saturday's protests in a personal capacity as he is still suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party on bogus antisemitism charges. He spoke to a demonstration of around 150 people in King's Lynn, a mark of his own discrediting as an oppositional figure among workers and youth.

In the previous period, the rightward lurch of the trade unions and the Labour Party could be partially concealed behind left talkers promising to take their organisation in a more radical direction. This political cover operation has been the main political function of the pseudo-left. But the unions are now so thoroughly alienated from and openly hostile to the working class that they are unwilling to throw their cheerleaders a bone.

The old "left" façade is falling to pieces. The pseudo-left organisations, who piggy-backed on the unions to punch above their own political weight, have been sent sprawling. A feature of the NHS protests were the piles of political placards with no one to hold them up—a repeat of scenes at the previous weekend's equally pitifully attended People's Assembly national demonstration in London, at which Corbyn was again a key speaker.

The working class is beginning to draw its own conclusions from the impotence and outright treachery of the trade unions and the escalating rightward lurch of the Labour Party. But this point blank raises the need to build a genuine movement dedicated to waging the class struggle and fighting for socialism.

The ruling class has already taken its cue from Saturday's debacle. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Charles Moore declared yesterday, "The NHS hasn't earned the George Cross. A

significant proportion of the suffering during Covid was caused by the fact the NHS was not fit for purpose." Railing against the "gigantic bureaucracy" of "our single most expensive taxpayer-funded national entity" and looking abroad to different models used by "other advanced nations", he concludes, "The Covid experience makes the case for NHS reform, not for collective sainthood."

This is a declaration of war on the NHS by its most determined enemies, who know they will encounter no serious opposition from Labour or the trade unions.

Workers must respond in kind.

The Socialist Equality Party has advanced the call for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. The IWA-RFC was launched in April by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) on the basis that, confronted with the pandemic and its socio-economic fallout, "For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions."

This would require "new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale", led by "a socialist leadership in the working class."

In the UK, this perspective is upheld by the NHS FightBack campaign, established by the Socialist Equality Party. NHS Fightback produced a statement for Saturday's Day of Action which insisted, "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... rank-and-file workplace committees, led by the most trusted workers and independent from the trade unions."

Health workers who agree with the need for such a struggle should contact NHS FightBack today.



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