

SOS NHS day of action: Health unions' politically criminal appeal to Tory MPs

Build NHS FightBack!

NHS FightBack
28 February 2022

The day of action called by the SOS NHS campaign group on Saturday managed to mobilise only a few thousand participants nationally.

Backed by major trade unions, including Unison, Unite and GMB that collectively represent over 600,000 workers in National Health Service (NHS), more than 70 events were attended mostly by union officials and members of various pseudo-left groupings. Very few health workers turned out.

This was according to plan. SOS NHS and the 11 trade unions that fund it had no intention of organising a mass movement in defence of the NHS and health workers facing the gravest crisis in history. SOS NHS was established to deflect from and cover over the treacherous refusal of the trade unions to mount any kind of fight over the pay and conditions of staff and oppose the ongoing privatisation of the NHS.

The organisation came into being in November 2021, following the unions' sabotage of a fight against the imposition of a below-inflation 3 percent pay rise for health workers by the Johnson government.

SOS NHS is described on its web site as a vehicle to build an "alliance between unions, NHS campaigns... social movements and civil society organisations." It has three demands: "Approve emergency funding of £20 billion to save lives this winter; Invest in a fully publicly owned NHS & guarantee free healthcare for future generations; Pay staff properly: without fair pay, staffing shortages will cost lives."

It claims this can be achieved by "forcing a political U-turn"—persuading the most right-wing of Conservative MPs to vote against their own government's Health and Care Bill. This is despite virtually the entire Tory parliamentary party having

already endorsed the legislation. The Health and Care Bill was given a third reading by 294, giving the Bill a majority of 50, paving its way to progress to the Lords second chamber. Just three Tory MPs voted against.

Little effort is made to hide the cynicism this involves. Despite SOS NHS saying "we doubt whether some MPs will subscribe to our demands," the group goes on to commend the "power of mass campaign" to put "political pressure on MPs across the political spectrum who may be vulnerable to the strength of opinion of their constituents."

There is no possibility of a "mass campaign" on such a perspective, as was underscored by the statement made by Unite the day before the protests: "The majority of Saturday's actions will be targeted at Tory MPs who voted in favour of the [Health & Social Care] Bill last November [all but three!]. Unite members will be handing out postcards and leaflets carrying their message to them to put their constituents and local health services first and vote against it this time."

Sharon Graham, general secretary of Unite, with over 100,000 members in the NHS, was brazen in backing protests she said would fail. Graham declared on the web page promoting the protests, "MPs must put their constituents before their private sector mates and vote to junk the Bill. Of course, it is unlikely they will."

The 11 unions behind SOS NHS have a collective membership of nearly 4 million, almost two-thirds of all union members in Britain. They sit atop an apparatus including tens of thousands of officials and command resources running into hundreds of millions of pounds. Yet they were unable to muster more than handful of minor functionaries at most of the events held on the day of action.

The gatherings were tiny in the UK's major cities. In Glasgow just 30 people, mainly members of various pseudo-left groups, turned out. In Sheffield, the demo mostly consisted of a collection of stalls hosted by members of the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and others. The same scene was witnessed in Newcastle, Leeds, and Manchester.

One of the most pathetic showings was in the Islington constituency of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Corbyn spoke at the event as an Independent MP as he was booted out of the parliamentary party over a year ago, with barely a whimper, by leader Sir Keir Starmer.

Corbyn's Peace and Justice Project is listed as a backer of SOS NHS. He cut a forlorn figure in the video of the event he released on his Twitter page. It was filmed from the side, so as not to reveal the fact he was speaking to a handful of mainly elderly participants. In brief remarks, he did not rise above expressing consternation at the "moral blackmail" health workers confronted, that they should receive a pay rise and be "loved and valued". After concluding that "healthcare is a human right", his words were met with a few polite claps.

Corbyn's call for NHS workers to be valued is hypocritical. As leader of the Labour Party to April 2021, as the pandemic took hold in Britain, he was privy to the Johnson government's plans for a herd immunity policy of letting the virus rip, and remained silent until no longer party leader. More recently, he has sided with the Tory right and libertarians in opposing mandatory vaccination for frontline health workers to protect patients' lives.

SOS NHS is the very opposite of a fighting organisation. Its purpose is to demobilise and chloroform workers through such futile actions as sending tweets to the health secretary politely asking that he "approve emergency funding of £20 billion, invest in a fully publicly owned NHS & guarantee free healthcare for all, and pay staff properly."

The virtual absence of NHS staff and other workers at the day of action does not signify a lack of willingness to fight. SOS NHS was set up to conceal the fact that there has been no serious campaign by the trade unions in defence of the NHS for years, bar a few token protests, after which the union bureaucracy returns to its policy of sellouts and suppressing struggles.

It is a creation of the union bureaucracy, which has sabotaged the fight to defend health workers pay and conditions through imposing a seemingly endless series of "consultative" ballots aimed at producing disillusionment and ensuring no strikes take place.

This enabled the Tory government to impose a twelfth below-inflation "pay rise," after a decade of funding cuts and rising workloads. According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), in 1995, trade union members earned on average almost 26 percent more than those not in a union. By 2020, this union "premium" had been steadily eroded to barely 4 percent. Since then, average private sector pay (which has the lowest rates of union membership) has moved ahead of the public sector, where most union members are to be found. Figures produced by the Office for National Statistics show that by December 2021, private sector pay had grown by 5.4 percent, only just keeping pace with the lower measure of inflation, while public sector pay rose by just 2.5 percent, well below inflation.

The trade unions have been transformed into organisations that ensure the share of wealth accrued by the capitalists increases to the detriment of workers. They operate today as an industrial police force for the corporations and the government.

A struggle to defend the NHS, and the pay and conditions of health workers, cannot be based on organisations who are effectively an extended arm of management. A fight must be undertaken independently of and in opposition to the trade unions.

This requires new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, to be set up in all workplaces. These must be led by the most trusted and militant workers, guided by a socialist perspective to replace the profit-driven capitalist system with one in which the needs of the many prevail over the greed of the billionaires and millionaires.

This is the programme of NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party. Make contact here, and link up with our Facebook page.



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