

UK trade unions and Labour MPs only attract a few thousand to NHS demonstration

Our reporters
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At most 5,000 people attended a national demonstration in support of the National Health Service (NHS) on Saturday.

Such a small turnout at a time when the NHS is facing the biggest crisis since its foundation, with hundreds of thousands of health workers engaged in live industrial disputes, marks the collapse of the organisers' political perspective. A quarter of a million protested attacks on the health service in 2017.

Saturday's march was called by SOS NHS, an umbrella organisation for campaign groups in the orbit of the Labour Party and the trade unions. After a debacle last year, which saw just a few thousand people attend dispirited events across the country, the organisation put substantial resources into what they declared would be a "massive" demonstration in London this weekend.

Coaches were laid on from Southampton, Manchester, Sheffield, Oxford, Banbury, Coventry and Birmingham, and speakers invited from the Labour Party, including former leader Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, and major trade unions.

But these are all deeply discredited forces with a dwindling following in the working class thanks to their years of betrayals of its social struggles. This was summed up by the embarrassing fact for SOS NHS that the march was originally called under the slogan "Support the strikes," but was held only weeks later under conditions where almost all NHS strikes have been called off to enter talks with the government.

The largest strike, of members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), was called off in Wales at the beginning of February to ballot on a roughly 6.5 percent consolidated pay offer plus a lump sum and in England at the end of the month without even an offer on the table. No action has taken place at all in Scotland while talks have been held with a Scottish National Party administration which has enforced a sub-inflation pay deal of 7.5 percent for 2022. The talks have produced a 6.5 percent offer for 2023, which the RCN is pushing members to accept.

Strikes by roughly 50,000 ambulance and other workers,

represented by Unison, the GMB and Unite were all brought to a halt by March 5, along with a strike of 64,000 physiotherapists and support workers in the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

Only junior doctors in the British Medical Association, not affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, currently have strike action planned—three consecutive days this week starting Monday.

The effect has been to kill the momentum of the health strikes, alongside similar actions by the rail unions and the Education Institute of Scotland, and remove all health workers—perhaps the most widely supported group of strikers—from the series of actions planned this week around Budget Day on March 15.

Representatives of the trade unions responsible this mass demobilisation were given a platform Saturday to spout rhetoric about defending the NHS.

Labour Party MPs Margaret Greenwood, Kate Osborne, Richard Burgon and John McDonnell, plus Corbyn who has been kicked out of the Parliamentary Labour Party, were invited to speak without once being challenged on the fact that their party has committed to greater involvement of the private sector in the NHS.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer has said Labour would "do more of" using the private sector and declared nothing "off limits" when it comes to the NHS, which should not be treated "as a shrine". Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting has threatened that the health service must "reform or die," describing doctors and health workers as "vested interests" that he would not allow to "stand in the way of reforms."

None of the Labour MPs who spoke Saturday used the occasion to directly challenge these statements, or Starmer's refusal to back health workers' demands.

On February 9, NHS FightBack, an initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), published the statement "Where next for the UK's National Health Service workers? A balance sheet of the strikes so far". It argued that a genuine fight to defend the NHS and its workforce

“demands a political and organisational struggle against a trade union bureaucracy sabotaging every one of these struggles, and a Labour Party colluding with the Tories in their attacks.”

It proposed, “Rank-and-file committees, democratically elected, must be formed in every workplace, to unify the growing wave of struggles to bring down the Tories. This fight must be waged consciously as part of the growing outbreak of the class struggle in Europe and internationally against the austerity and war policies of the world’s governments.”

SEP members distributed this statement at Saturday’s demonstration and discussed the issue with health workers and their supporters.

Ian, a nurse in a drug and alcohol team, attended with his partner Mel, a worker in a community mental health centre, and their two children. Ian told the WSWS, “We’ve worked in [the NHS] for 15 years and have seen it get cut to shreds: jobs have got harder, waiting lists have got longer, A&E [Accident and Emergency] has got more chaotic, patients are sicker, people are getting poorer, staff are working longer hours.

“There hasn’t been enough action, and now it feels like we’ve realised that we have to take this into our own hands: we have to strike to win the kind of pay which will improve staffing and safety.

The running down of the NHS “is by design; they are doing it on purpose... It’s not their [the government’s] problem: they have private health care; they get paid by private health care companies.”

Asked about the Labour Party’s support for greater use of the private sector in the NHS, Ian said, “It’s bonkers. It’s totally nuts. Labour went there before with Independent Sector Treatment Centres [which provide outsourced services to the NHS]. It was a massive waste of money. Money gets lost into private profit and profit gets put first... And when it goes wrong, the NHS still picks up the pieces.”

Ian criticised the calling off of health care strikes by unions including the GMB, Unison and Unite. “Once a meaningful offer is on the table, then you can think about calling it off. But calling it off or suspending it during negotiations, you are kind of disarming yourself. Particularly with a government that has shown itself willing to lie... I think we should still be striking.”

Christine, a junior doctor, explained, “I’m here to support other NHS workers and the junior doctors. I’m on strike myself next week to ensure fair pay for all NHS workers and to overcome the staffing crisis we’re facing.”

“I worked in a COVID ITU [Intensive Therapy Unit], and I hope I never have to see anything like that again. It was horrendous. We don’t want to be ‘heroes’; we just want to

be able to do our job.”

Silan, a junior doctor at University College Hospital, said, “I’ll be going on strike next week. Every day we’re seeing patients dying because of the chronic cuts over the last 10 years. It’s all coming to a head now as the Tories try to privatise our NHS even further.”

Silan said cuts were a deliberate policy to wear the health service down. “There’s no other explanation... I think the numbers speak for themselves: the number of doctors who are leaving, the number of nurses who are burning out, the number of patients who are dying. I think this is a deliberate policy to dismantle the NHS so they have an excuse to sell it off to their mates.”

Asked about the Labour Party’s support for using the private sector, she said, “Privatisation is not the answer... There’s a huge, vested interest. And I think the Labour Party are not doing enough to oppose the Tory policies.

“Whether there’ll be a general strike, I don’t know, but personally I’d be in huge support of that.”

Claire, a worker in children’s care said, “I’m here because I feel very strongly about the dishonest way in which the government and possibly the Labour Party as well are dismantling the NHS and doing privatisation by stealth.

“We, the public, are paying the extra money that’s going to profits. When you look at what’s happened in America, if we follow that model, it’d be very scary because they make huge profits and they don’t do preventative care and they link it to your job. So, if you’re out of work, you’re out of luck.”

Simon told our reporters, “The NHS is under attack from the Tories, from the capitalists. I’m a socialist, I’m usually a Labour voter, but I can’t vote for them at the moment. Some of the things that the [Labour] front bench has said, if I didn’t know who was saying it, I’d assume it was a Tory.”

Speaking about the government’s defence spending increase, Simon added, “This is not where we should be going. Ukraine is a complicated situation. It’s not a bunch of angels being attacked by demons... NATO are piling these weapons in. They want to see how they stand up against Russian forces.

“Ukraine was invaded, it was against international law, but when do you say, enough Ukrainians have died, it’s time to do something different? There are no voices saying this. Do we just keep fighting until there are none of them left?”



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