

Wes Streeting prepares Labour for deepening attack on UK's National Health Service

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The Labour Party is gearing up to deepen the offensive against the UK's National Health Service (NHS) if it wins a general election.

Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting came up through the National Union of Students apparatus, serving two terms as president of the NUS (2008-09), before being elected as a Labour councillor and then becoming MP for Ilford North in 2015.

His attachment to pro-Zionist groups, such as Labour Friends of Israel, the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Jews, and serving in 2015 as the vice chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism—saw Streeting play a major role in the purge of former leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters. He previously sat as Shadow Minister for Schools. Alongside Deputy Leader Angela Rayner, Streeting is one of the main candidates in a future Labour leader contest.

At Labour's conference in October, Streeting took a few pot shots at the Conservative government, lambasting the "audacity" of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for blaming the NHS for its own failures. The NHS was a "two-tier health service, where those who can afford it go private and those who can't are left behind... our NHS reduced to a poor service for poor people," he said.

But behind this anti-Tory rhetoric, Streeting made clear that Labour would be at the service of the bourgeoisie when it came to the NHS. Streeting glossed over the impact of cuts on the NHS, including the deaths of 240,000 people in the past two years while waiting for hospital treatment, the 50,000 more excess deaths in 2022 than 2019, the almost half a million excess deaths over the last decade due to Tory austerity, the 4 million people without NHS dental care, or the dire consequences of an ill-equipped, underfunded and understaffed NHS facing the global pandemic that was allowed to rip through the populace.

Streeting simply declared that "Labour will deliver 700,000 extra appointments each year" and would provide "faster treatment for patients... extra pay for staff," as well as "providing two million more appointments each year."

Labour's proposals would in fact involve already overstretched doctors working weekends, with Streeting arriving at Labour's conference having already denounced a "Monday to Friday culture" in hospitals.

Streeting was making good on his pledge that Labour will not provide the much needed increase in NHS funding. He repeated in his speech that "pouring ever-increasing amounts of money into a system that isn't working is wasteful in every sense. A waste of money we don't have." Instead, "our NHS must modernise or die."

Responding to Streeting's speech, the Royal College of Nursing stated that staff already work vast amounts of unpaid overtime and that "weekend work is routine for many."

A "Labour government would likely take office at a time of record unfilled nurse jobs, in excess of 40,000," it predicted.

The funding package Streeting proposed was a meagre £1.1 billion. In November 2022, when Conservative government Chancellor Jeremy Hunt pledged an additional £3.3 billion to the NHS, experts cited by the *Guardian* declared that this was half of what was required to cover the £7 billion deficit predicted by NHS England for 2022/23—which will only grow larger next year.

Unfulfilled jobs vacancies extend across the NHS, with waiting lists still climbing, hitting a record high of 7.8 million and a shocking 123,000 waiting over 12 hours in A&E. In other areas records are being hit, with 396,643 waiting (in August) over 52 weeks for routine hospital treatment, including 8,998 who have been waiting over 18 months for routine hospital treatment.

"Today's statistics show the NHS is running red hot as it enters the busy winter period," Siva Anandaciva, lead analyst at The King's Fund said. "A&E departments have had a busy summer and are now facing a punishing winter."

The winter firestorm will likely be fed by an increasing number of COVID cases. In the *Financial Times*, King's Fund head Richard Murray—who has worked in health policy for 30 years, warned that "we run the risk of a repeat last

winter, which was incredibly bad,” citing the combination of flu, COVID and norovirus.

A 2015 study for the *BMJ*, formerly *British Medical Journal*, on the opt-out clause for elective weekend work noted that many consultants worked weekends already in the private sector. Freedom of Information requests to the Department of Health showed that the contract allowed consultants to “negotiate higher rates of pay for [private weekend] work, rather than doing it for the rates payable under the national contract terms”.

Providing the necessary hundreds of billions of pounds to the NHS requires a challenge to the private sector that is antithetical to the agenda Streeting has planned for the NHS.

Streeting’s other proposal envisages a shift from hospital work to community work, involving General Practitioners. In August he wrote in the pro-Tory *Telegraph* declaring that “GP practices will be provided with incentives to offer patients continuity of care,” while financially penalising GPs that “underperform” in service.

When this was opposed by senior figures in the Royal College of GPs, the *Sunday Times* reported that Streeting complained, “GPs are acting against patients’ interests by blocking progress”.

Streeting cynically declared, “The era of simply pouring more money into a broken system is over.” Reiterating that he “won’t entertain requests for blank cheques”, he said this was “counter to what GPs and patients need.”

“Where will patients go if it is made even more difficult to see a doctor?” he asked. “Those who can afford to pay will go private”.

The last round of attacks on the NHS instigated by the Tories saw the carving up of the NHS into 42 integrated care systems to further privatisation. The recipe is the same for a Labour government.

Streeting received a £15,000 taster payment (as reported by the *Skwawkbox blog*) from a hedge fund manager and Tory donor with a large share in the health conglomerate UnitedHealth (UH), the world’s largest privately owned health care company. UH is a US-based corporation that has had a significant impact on the ongoing privatisation of the NHS. The company was from 2004-2014 headed by Simon Stevens, a Blairite advisor and head of NHS England from 2014 to 2021.

In the year up to Streeting’s conference speech NHS workers across all professions took strike action, including historic moves such as the RCN’s first ever nationwide strike. These struggles were sabotaged by the health unions using every possible tactic to stall, call off, minimise and isolate every strike.

Streeting became a poster boy for the *Telegraph* as they urged the government to face down and defeat health

workers. In March, after an interview he had with LBC Radio in which he opposed industrial action by junior doctors, the newspaper ran an article under the headline, “Wes Streeting: I don’t support the junior doctors’ strike.”

The Tory party conference called for the use of new strike-breaking legislation, pushed through last year, to crush future struggles of the working class, Streeting showed his own willingness to work with the union bureaucracy in sabotaging any future struggles. He said of the offer of the British Medical Association (BMA) at the time to halt any further strikes, “There is a window of opportunity for negotiations before the next round of strikes takes place.”

This week it was reported that the BMA has accepted a real-terms pay cut for senior consultants as the basis to end the dispute.

The *Telegraph* gushed over his party conference speech, “Shadow health secretary Wes Streeting sounded the right notes yesterday on the NHS.” Posed to Starmer, but clearly intended for Streeting’s consideration, it then asked, “Would Mr Starmer bow to the pay demands of striking doctors?”

It then warned that “promising continuity [Tory prime minister] Sunakism, executed more competently, is not enough. It is time for Labour to be bold.”

Labour used to utilise the NHS as its badge of honour. Birted by Labour Minister of Health Aneurin Bevan in 1948, it was cited ever since as the jewel in the Labour crown. The reforms proposed by Streeting, including denouncing Sunak for “announcing pots of funding” as “bad policy”, and the attacks on GPs, shows that today Labour is intent on positioning itself to the right of the Tories as the *Telegraph* has demanded.



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