

Wes Streeting sees UK's National Health Service as an “engine of economic growth” and condemns “begging bowl culture”

Ben Trent
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The Labour Government’s Health Secretary Wes Streeting outlined his battle plans against the National Health Service (NHS) at the *Future of Britain 2024* event held on July 9 by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. These were first advanced at the Labour Party Conference at the tail-end of last year. Now in power, Labour is preparing to ram home this right-wing, pro-business agenda.

Streeting’s speech focussed on calls to “rethink” the role of the NHS. In a screed that few Conservative MPs would dare to match, he said that meant “ending the begging bowl culture, where the only interaction the Treasury has with the Department of Health is ‘we need more money for X, Y and Z’.”

He made clear that the role of the NHS would be to keep workers producing profits for the corporations. “We are going to be a government that recognises... that as we get people not just back to health, but back to work, that is a big contribution to growth.” Health and social care providers were not fulfilling a human right but expected to “be engines of economic growth”.

This was especially important, he said, “when there are three million people who [are] off work sick.”

The Tony Blair Institute published a report recently suggesting 50,000 employees aged 50-64 who are on long-term sickness due to heart disease could be back in work within 5 years—some of whom would be 69 at such a point—if treated with statins and weight loss jabs. According to the health secretary, measures aimed at boosting the able-bodied workforce are intended to generate an extra £20 billion in the UK economy by 2030.

While these plans are now framed in terms of providing people with the healthcare they need to be

made fit to work, the project will be bound up with a vicious demonisation of the unemployed as workshy malingers, with no regard for their physical or mental wellbeing.

With Labour running for election and now governing as a party committed to NATO and its wars, and the running of a war economy, the need for a full mobilisation of the working population is particularly important alongside massive cuts in social spending.

Above all, Labour and the ruling class are determined to drive back to work those left sick by the long-term effects of COVID, the strain of unsustainable work hours and the gutting of public health and local authority services in the years of austerity.

That the COVID pandemic now totally ignored by politicians and most of the media is a major factor is clear. Figures available from the Office for National Statistics point to a dramatic increase in long-term sickness shortly after the explosion of the COVID pandemic. The sharp rise continues as governments globally have abandoned all measures to combat the pandemic.

The obvious impact of Long COVID on the health of the population is further demonstrated when comparing reasons for illness, with the shift of respiratory conditions from the fifth highest cause to the fourth above that of mental health.

Streeting also set out plans to make healthcare in the UK a lucrative arena for private investment. He explained, “The government will aim to make the UK a life sciences and medical technology powerhouse. By ensuring the NHS works hand-in-hand with life sciences research institutions and medical technology companies, the government will drive the development

of new treatments and help grow the industries.”

He spoke of the Labour Party forming “partnerships with the private sector that goes beyond hospitals.”

This is an echo of a report issued by Blair and ex-Tory party leader, William Hague in January of this year. “A New National Purpose: Leading the Biotech Revolution” argued that while the UK had been one of the “world’s leading financial capitals” it was at risk of losing out due to stringent laws on venture capital. It argued for various reforms to encourage the growth of the biotech industry and supported the move to AI Doctors, pointing positively to work conducted by Google DeepMind-Moorfields and the UK Biobank.

Streeting’s plans for private involvement in the NHS and the healthcare sector at large are well funded by vested interests.

In 2023, John Armitage, a hedge-fund manager who previously funded the Conservatives and has links to private medical firms, gifted £80,000 to Streeting. Peter Hearn affiliated companies—one of them reported to have set up Tory Party Peer Virginia Bottomley as chair of NHS Improvement—gifted Streeting a further £105,000 in 2023.

This is the context in which Streeting met last week with the co-chairs of the British Medical Association (BMA) junior doctors committee (JDC) Dr. Robert Laurenson and Dr. Vivek Trivedi to end the long-running strikes in England for pay restoration of 35 percent to make up for the real term cuts since 2008. The JDC Twitter account had posted on July 5 congratulating Streeting on his victory and explaining “we want to work with you to get the NHS back on its feet”.

Suggestions from any union leadership that there is any positive change in policy towards the NHS brought about by the Labour government are transparent lies. The BMA JDC leaders left their meeting with Streeting empty-handed, while still assuring him that there would be no further action in the foreseeable future.

As explained by the WSWS, this will set the tone for the co-operation of the entire trade union bureaucracy with the Labour government’s assault on the NHS and its workforce. Rachel Harrison, National Secretary of GMB union also congratulated Streeting on Labour’s election, saying she was encouraged by his words on resetting the “relationship between the workforce and government”. The Society of Radiographers stated

plainly, “We want to see the new government working in close partnership with unions”.

Labour, which historically prided itself on being the party of the NHS, now represents its most immediate threat. Under the usual guise of “reforms”, it will go far further than the Private Finance Initiatives of the Blair administration. Against the collaboration of the trade union leaderships, workers in the health care service and beyond must prepare a reopening and expansion of the strike wave of the last two years to defend the right to free, universal and quality public healthcare for all.

Contact NHS FightBack today to discuss the way forward.



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