

Dorset National Health Service workers denounce plans to transfer contracts to private subsidiary

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This week, campaigners from NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, spoke with dozens of National Health Service (NHS) workers to rally opposition to the Dorset NHS Trusts' plan to transfer 1,300 staff to a newly created private subsidiary company, SubCo.

NHS FightBack is calling workers not to trust trade union leaders who have betrayed struggle after struggle and to build rank and file committees to take control of their own fate.

Hundreds of copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* article, "Dorset National Health Service prepares mass transfer of staff to private subsidiary in cost-cutting drive," were distributed across the three affected NHS foundation trusts—University Hospitals Dorset, Dorset HealthCare, and Dorset County Hospital. The proposed transfer targets some of the lowest-paid NHS workers, including porters, catering staff, housekeepers, and estates staff, in a move widely understood as backdoor privatisation.

Many doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals learned of the plan for the first time. Some were shocked to hear this was happening in their trust. Trade unions—including the British Medical Association and Royal College of Nursing—have largely kept their members in the dark, failing to inform let alone mobilising them against this sweeping attack on their fellow workers. Unison, though formally involved in the dispute, has confined its response to ineffective appeals to MPs, trust boards, and governors, rather than organizing collective resistance.

Workers voiced strong opposition to the draconian attack on healthcare workers setting a dangerous precedent for further privatisation within the NHS.

Many affected workers expressed their appreciation to NHS FightBack for its efforts, with several taking extra leaflets to share within their departments.

A housekeeping worker at Royal Bournemouth Hospital (RBH) told us she was firmly opposed to the plan:

"They think we're lower grade workers, but we're not stupid. We know what will happen."

Another worker shared that his wife, who works for the National Careers Service, had received information indicating that another round of major redundancies is planned at RBH—on top of those already cut through the MARS voluntary redundancy scheme. "They've just built this massive new building, and now they're getting ready to destroy the service," he said, pointing to the new facility built as a result of the 2017 Clinical Service Review, which streamlined services under the banner of cost-saving.

Another worker told us she thought the plans were "absolutely disgusting. I think it's taking no account of the workers in here or what they feel about it." She said the move was purely about cutting costs, "but never for the managers."

The transfers are being imposed under threat. One porter at RBH explained:

"We'll see how it goes in September. I don't want to sign [to the SubCo] but what choice do I have? They say if you don't, you'll be out of a job."

He asked, "What are [trade union] Unison doing about it? They say they've got a three-pronged approach, but I don't think it's going to work. If the management say to the union rep 'don't rock the boat,' they'll fall in line."

We discussed with the porter how Unison continues

to promote the Labour Party, despite its record on austerity. He responded:

“That’s why I never vote. I look at these governments and they never improve anything for us, do nothing for our wages. [Former Conservative Prime Minister] Rishi Sunak kept the national insurance threshold frozen, Labour kept that—so even if you get a pay rise, you’re taking less of it home. They all want to line their own pockets.”

He condemned Unison’s silence on the SubCo plans until they were officially announced:

“It was in the public domain before that. I was telling people days before but the union weren’t.”

Pointing to the official hypocrisy regarding workplace conditions, he added:

“The new building has these ‘nooks’ where you’re supposed to be able to sit and have a chat. I’ve only ever seen managers in there—if a cleaner tried to take a break like that, management would be yelling at them ‘get back to work!’”

Dozens of leaflets were distributed across St. Ann’s Hospital, Wareham Hospital, and Alderney Hospital—all community hospitals within the Dorset HealthCare University NHS Foundation Trust. Many workers asked for additional leaflets to display in their departments and to share with colleagues.

Campaigners spoke with one catering worker affected by the plans, who said he had already read our article online and took several leaflets to distribute. He said, “We’ve been told you’ll keep your pay and conditions for 10 years, but how can we believe that?”

This assurance came with a clear threat—that workers would only retain those conditions “as long as you sign on the first day... It’s important to raise awareness—other workers [not affected by the change] don’t even know about it.”

Another affected worker described the plan as “a massive attack on our conditions.” He connected it directly to broader NHS privatisation:

“I think it’s all going to go private. Look at dentistry—you can’t even get an (NHS) appointment anymore, and you pay a fortune for private treatment.”

The trade unions have “in the last 20 years become useless.... They aren’t like they used to be. Everyone used to be scared of the unions then.”

A worker in the estates department explained, “You have some very unhappy people here. We were only

just briefed on it a few days ago. They’re saying there’s nothing we can do, speaking about it like it’s already a done deal.”

Due to the betrayal of the trade unions, many workers at Dorchester County Hospital were left unaware of the proposed changes to the contracts of a section of the workforce.

One estates worker said scathingly: “In management-led meetings, they openly lie about the SubCo. Every time they speak, the story changes! I don’t buy any of it. They claim our NHS pay, terms, and conditions won’t change—so why are they trying to transfer us to a SubCo in the first place?

“Some of our colleagues don’t realise that our rights were hard-won by those who came before us. We shouldn’t let anyone take those gains away. And honestly, I don’t think the unions are doing enough to defend them.”

To NHS workers in Dorset and nationally, share your stories with the World Socialist Web Site. Contact NHS FightBack to link up with other healthcare workers in the struggle to secure high-quality healthcare for all, provided by a valued and supported workforce. Visit our Facebook page and X account here.



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