

NHS FightBack campaigns at Royal Bournemouth Hospital protest: “We shouldn’t be afraid to speak up”

Our reporters
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Nurses and other clinical staff at Royal Bournemouth Hospital joined a lunch time protest on Tuesday in support of their colleagues who are affected by plans to mass transfer them onto new contracts under a private subsidiary, known as a “SubCo”.

Around 1,300 workers—including caterers, porters, cleaners, estate and maintenance workers—will be transferred into a SubCo by September. Workers across the Dorset Hospital Trusts (DHT) will be affected, with similar lunch time protests this week at Poole General Hospital and Dorset County Hospital.

Members of NHS FightBack distributed copies of a leaflet advertising next Monday night’s Zoom meeting, “No to Labour’s NHS privatisation! Oppose mass staff transfer to private subsidiaries!” NHS workers took extra copies to share with their departments.

Almost every NHS worker rejected management claims that their working conditions under the new SubCo would be maintained. Indeed, DHT leaders have refused to put their verbal assurances in writing.

The SubCo can legally change workers’ conditions after April next year, in what amounts to “fire and rehire” in two steps.

A worker from housekeeping told NHS FightBack: “They say we can keep our conditions for 10 years. That’s pure sugar-coating. The working class already has to worry so much about money, now they make us worry more. All these cuts are to make more money from us, they never cut the higher-ups’ pay.”

Those impacted by the SubCo plans emphasised unity with their colleagues, “We need to get everyone who thinks they’re not affected to get involved. We’ve been working very hard to make sure they know what’s happening.”

Senior management appeared during the protest so they could claim to be “listening” to NHS workers’ concerns. They spoke with Unison officials for a while. The managers asked if there was any way they could make the SubCo acceptable to workers; Unison officials replied that they would oppose the plans, but if they were inevitable, they would instead fight for the best possible terms at the SubCo.

Maz from housekeeping said, “They’re trying to get rid of the lowest band... and basically, we as the housekeeping department or any non-clinical staff are not feeling safe right now.

“They keep saying ‘nothing will change’, ‘you will keep your rights’, but that’s not true. They can say what they like but it’s written saying [that] if anything will change, like any economic changes, *any* changes, they can change our contracts as well. So anything could happen. We’ve got coronavirus already in the past. We’ve got inflation coming and going, so it could change in a few months’ time. They can’t guarantee anything.”

Maz’s message to patients and the public was, “Please, please, please support us. Please read about these changes because what these people [in the hospital trusts] are saying is not always the truth. We’ve been told in many meetings that ‘nothing will change’. But please support us because without the lowest bands, without non-clinical staff, hospitals will not cope.”

Maz dismissed Labour’s claims about targeting waste and bureaucracy, “Our Prime Minister said they want to get rid of loads of unnecessary management teams. Why are they starting with the lowest bands? Even in our hospital there are loads of managers after managers

after managers.

“I’ve been working here 10 years and we’ve never had that before. Before, we had basic supervisor positions and basic managers’ positions. Now we’ve got loads of them. It’s a nonsense for me, because we basically need non-clinical staff on the lowest bands, especially now when we’ve opened the new building and a new one is coming as well. We’re short of staff already!

“We should be visible to everyone, to the public. And we should speak up— we shouldn’t be afraid to speak up.”

Matthew, a nurse who turned out to support the protest, said: “I think it’s important to make our voices heard about the plans to subcontract NHS workers to these subsidiary companies to save money. It just sounds, in my view, that this is just gonna result in the eroding of NHS workers’ pay and conditions, I think it’s probably a slippery slope to more privatisation and I think we should keep the NHS public.”

Matthew also rejected Starmer’s attacks on immigrant workers, “Obviously the latest news with this new restriction on overseas workers—from my perspective the NHS couldn’t work without overseas workers. It seems like there’s so many people working for the NHS that come from abroad. I just don’t see how it could possibly cope without overseas workers.”

Responding to the call from NHS FightBack for a united struggle by health workers and patients to oppose Labour’s cuts and privatisation, Matthew said, “It’s a good idea, yeah. I’ve heard there’s a Zoom meeting coming up to discuss these things, so I’m hoping to tune in for that.”

Tom, a clinical engineer and Unite rep, said, “I need to stand up for the people and make sure that we don’t have a two-tier system in the NHS: an NHS provider, and then the backroom people like ourselves who become a privatised company in effect.”

Asked for his views on what action was needed, Tom replied, “There’s lots of things we can do and if it comes to industrial action that’s something we will have to consider.”

Responding to Labour’s attacks on the NHS, Tom said it was “Pretty poor to be honest. I’m not convinced with Labour. I’m not convinced with any of the three major parties when it comes to this. It seems

about every man for himself. That’s not how we want to be. We don’t want to end up like America.

Tom confirmed that people in his own department are affected, “Absolutely, yeah. And unfortunately, the people who would be running this SubCo couldn’t run a bath. They’re useless. They’ve overspent on this building behind us by about £250 million.

So they don’t know how to budget, [and] they don’t know how to talk to the unions properly... So why should we trust them to run another company?”

Patients on their way in to the hospital also took leaflets from NHS FightBack. Many were shocked to hear about the SubCo plans, opposing Labour’s cuts and privatisation measures.

One patient said, “Thank you for what you’re doing. You know, Labour, all of these politicians, they offer nothing to the working class. It’s sad to say, but I think they’re not for our class.” Pointing to Labour’s support for the Gaza genocide and arrest of protesters, he added, “Starmer used to be a human rights lawyer, but look at him now.”

Join our online meeting on Monday May 19, at 7 p.m., and encourage your colleagues to attend. Register for the NHS FightBack Zoom meeting here.



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