

Dorset County Hospital workers protest creation of subsidiary company threatening terms and conditions

Our reporters
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On Thursday, dozens of clinical and non-clinical health workers at Dorset County Hospital (DCH) in Dorchester, England staged a protest against the proposed transfer of many staff to a private subsidiary company (SubCo). The company, set to be functioning by September, was established by Dorset National Health Service (NHS) management as part of a cost-cutting initiative.

Last month, 1,300 employees across University Hospitals Dorset (UHD), Dorset County Hospital (DCH), and Dorset HealthCare NHS Trusts were informed of plans to mass transfer them to the SubCo. The move affects essential staff in housekeeping, catering, portering, estates, and health and safety—many among the lowest-paid workers in the NHS.

This measure by Dorset Trust is part of a broader effort by the Labour government to dismantle and privatise core areas of the NHS.

The lunchtime protest was the third at NHS hospitals in Dorset, following protests, Tuesday and Wednesday, at Royal Bournemouth Hospital and Poole General Hospital.

Delegates from neighbouring areas, including Wiltshire and Avon, and Yeovil—where NHS services and workers' pay, pensions, and conditions are also under threat—attended in solidarity.

The UNISON trade union, which organised the protests, has offered no meaningful strategy for a unified fightback by health workers. Health Secretary Wes Streeting is playing a leading role in advancing NHS privatisation, yet Unison continues to foster illusions that appealing to Labour and other MPs, trust boards and governors will be enough to halt SubCos.

NHS FightBack campaign teams have distributed a statement, “No to Labour’s NHS privatisation! Oppose mass staff transfer to private subsidiaries!”, calling on workers to join an online Zoom meeting to discuss a socialist strategy to resist the attacks on the NHS and to defend the pay, pensions, and working conditions of health staff.

At the Dorchester protest, many health workers were shocked by the far-right rant of the Labour prime minister Sir Kier Starmer against migrant workers, many who are crucial to the

running of the NHS.

Krystian, a clinical engineer at Dorset County Hospital, was appalled by the noxious political climate, particularly the scapegoating of migrants and other vulnerable groups.

“All they do is try to distract us with stupid nonsense,” he said. “The endless bashing of trans people, the bashing of immigrants—it’s a tale as old as time. They’re constantly pointing the finger elsewhere, a misdirection, when we know exactly where the money in this country has gone—to the richest, the wealthiest.”

Krystian argued that the main political parties serve the interests of big business, not the working class. “They’re completely funded by businesses and industries that are extracting all the wealth from the people—from the workers—for themselves,” he said. “There’s a huge and growing inequality between the haves and the have-nots, and it’s only going to get worse unless something changes. Ultimately, it’s the class struggle that will decide.”

He saw the creation of a SubCo as part of a “process of privatisation. We’ve seen it with every other publicly owned service in England. Look at the water companies—now expensive and useless. Look at the energy companies—also expensive and increasingly useless.”

The majority of people support public ownership of utilities and the NHS, yet this is ignored by those in power. “None of the main political parties offer any of that in their manifestos,” he said. “Democracy in this country has been completely captured, and it’s disgusting.”

“We’re not just cleaners—we’re a lifeline”

Jessica, a housekeeper at DCH, expressed deep concern about the impact on migrant colleagues and patient care, as a result of the anti-immigrant offensive.

“I’m usually a Labour voter,” she said. “I backed them again, hoping they’d fix things in the NHS. But what I’ve seen

recently—especially how international staff are treated—has shocked me. I don't think the government really understands how hospitals are struggling."

Jessica fears the creation of a SubCo could jeopardise visa statuses, leave bank staff uncertain, and undermine workers' rights. "We still haven't been told clearly what's happening to our pay, pensions, or protections," she said.

Her biggest concern was the impact of a SubCo on patient care. "If housekeepers and porters are removed from wards, the pressure will fall on already overstretched nurses and healthcare assistants (HCAs). We do so much more than clean. We're often the ones bringing comfort—a chat, a cup of tea, a hand to hold. Patients rely on us, especially those without family.

"People don't realise we care for patients like they're our own family. We're not just cleaners—we're a lifeline."

Asked how the change would affect her pay, pension, and working conditions, Jessica said, "We've been told we'll be TUPE'd over [transferred with current employment terms], which is supposed to protect our terms and conditions for a few years. But from what I've read, that can change at any time—and we're not getting any firm guarantees from management."

Peter Simmons, a GP who retired 12 years ago, said, "I've been on the other side, receiving treatment from the NHS, and the NHS is the most fantastic health service... The treatment I've had is absolutely spectacular, and all the time they're trying to undermine it and privatise it. This is a terrible way to go."

He called for renewed commitment to a public health system. "We need to stick to a publicly funded NHS, which is properly funded for all the people, free at the point of use—and that is so important.

"This latest move is privatisation by the back door. 1,300 workers are going to be transferred to a private company. Absolutely."

"We need to pay the people working in the NHS. It's not an easy job. It's unsocial hours. They need to be properly paid. They need to have proper terms of employment—and not to be undermined like this."

Ray Tostevin, a National Union of Journalists member, representative of Yeovil and District Trades Council, and campaigner in defence of public healthcare said, "We're quite appalled to hear that many colleagues here in Dorset are facing the possibility of being taken over by a private company. We stand up in solidarity against that.

"I and many others have been campaigning to stop our emergency stroke unit from being closed at Yeovil Hospital. Patients shouldn't be forced to travel much further away to Musgrove Park or here in Dorset County Hospital.

"Only yesterday we heard our maternity services are being downgraded temporarily—so called—for six months. It will not be possible to have your baby born at Yeovil Hospital and the

special care baby unit is closed for six months—apparently because of the staffing shortages. But management have known for months that there were issues."

Rich Gurney, Wiltshire and Avon vice-chair of Unison, said the union's membership includes people "who were put into an arm's-length body by NHS trusts in Wiltshire. They soon found they weren't on NHS terms and conditions when they didn't get the COVID payment that other NHS staff got."

After taking strike action workers received the missing payment. However, "They were rewarded earlier this year by finding that, along with other staff, they were going to be transferred to an organisation called HCRG. HCRG took over [another private firm] Virgin Care. They are owned by an American hedge fund that is viciously against trade unions which is anti-union and doesn't really know an awful lot about healthcare. They have become a multi-million pound provider...

"We're fighting a union recognition battle, but also to bring services back into the NHS where they belong. Primary care services and specialist services should be being provided by the NHS, not by an organisation that its key primary motive, as a hedge fund, has to be to make profits for its shareholders. That's not right."

Asked why Unison, with 1.3 million members, has failed to mount a unified national struggle against SubCos, Gurney replied, "We've fought, but often that has been at the local level—and that's been the criticism from some of us. A union as big as Unison, which is *the* public sector union hasn't been punching its weight, many of us feel.

"We represent people particularly in local government, but in health as well... it's our NHS. We want a union that fights to defend not just our members' terms and conditions but the services provided. The only way we can do that is by having a strategy, a national strategy, not leaving it branches to fight individually as we do at the minute."

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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