

Workers' Liberty

Activists' Bulletin

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the working class will rise again

NHS unions must lead the fight for the future of the National Health Service

Step up the campaign!

The lobby of parliament called by the NHS unions on November 1st is a crucial step forward in the campaign to save the NHS. The campaign is developing beyond simply a series of local fights, but it is not yet a massive force which can challenge the Government.

The growing numbers of local demonstrations, lobbies and meetings about the crisis in the NHS has pushed the issue to the front of the national political debate.

Every party conference had a debate on the issue. David Cameron even tried to claim the NHS was safe in the Tories hands. But the Tory policy is no different from that of Blair — no limits on privatisation and full speed ahead with foundation trusts and PFI.

The Lib Dems offer nothing better. In fact their Health Spokesman has said the problem with New Labour's plans is that they don't allow for the creation of a "true market" for health!

Very few political voices are arguing for a publicly-owned health service, although in the Labour Party, left wing leadership hopeful John McDonnell has done so.

The NHS will be an important election issue next May. New Labour are already calculating the likely effect of NHS cuts on marginal seats.

Will the NHS campaign burgeon into a mass mobilisation, like the anti-poll tax campaign did twenty years ago? Then "official politics" offered no alternative to Thatcher's poll tax. Millions refused to pay and the Tory government was forced to backdown. Building a national campaign with that kind of spirit and involvement would be an achievement.

However there are negative lessons from the anti-poll tax campaign. Then the trade unions lagged behind in the fight. Trade union action could have strengthened the revolt, even to the extent of getting rid of the whole Tory government. And such a victory could have

stopped and reversed the right wing drift inside the Labour Party that led to Blair.

The trade unions seem once again to be dragging their feet over the NHS.

In the early stages of the campaign, the need for all the unions to work together was cited as a reason for the 'slow and steady' approach to campaigning. But now that the NHS Together campaign has been brought together by the TUC, and organised the lobby of Parliament on November 1st, there can be no more excuses.

The unions must:

-> **Set a date for the national demonstration**, so that activists around the country can prepare for it now. Organising transport, and building for a big turnout, takes time, and the momentum built up for the lobby of parliament must not be lost.

-> **Launch a positive campaign for safe staffing levels at work**. Although cuts are happening across the NHS, and having many different effects, the impact on patient and staff safety is a stark focus. Where cuts are leaving wards and departments understaffed, the unions should be providing members with the backing and the information they need to be able to

take on local managers, and fight for adequate staffing numbers to keep themselves and their patients safe.

-> **Use the unions' political influence** - not just their political fund money, but also their parliamentary groups of MPs, links with local Labour Party branches, and other resources - to direct political pressure onto Government ministers and other Blairite MPs. Unions should force reselection battles in Constituency Labour Parties which have Blairite MPs and stand health workers, and other trade unionists, against the Blairites.

-> **Say what they mean**. The unions' demands so far have been for consultation and to "slow down" the changes. But we want privatisation stopping, and reversing. So that's what we should demand!



To save the NHS we need huge protests but also strikes and a political fightback.

Why healthworkers should reject the NHS Pension proposals

With accusations still around that it was generous pay deals that led to the financial crisis in the NHS it might seem a little selfish for staff to be worrying about their pensions when the future of the NHS itself is at stake.

But the issues of pensions and pay for NHS staff are closely tied to the privatisation agenda. One thing the big corporations are fearful of when taking on NHS staff is liability for ongoing terms and conditions, wages and pension payments. Whilst these remain a commitment protected by TUPE legislation the government looks for ways to sweeten the pill for their private sector partners.

As predicted last year the proposals for a new NHS pension scheme mean that for existing staff to maintain their current rights we will have to pay more. For the majority of staff this will be an extra 0.5% raising their contributions to 6.5% of their annual salary. Some, estimates are about 100,000, lower paid (those earning less than £15,000 p.a.) will pay 1% less than currently and a few higher earners (with an annual income above than £60,881) will pay 1.5% more. There are various welcome benefits introduced to give partners rights and new flexibility on the ability to take a lump sum at the cost of a reduced annual pension.

Also there are no guarantees that there will not be any further rises in employee contributions if more money is needed to fund the scheme in the future. The proposal includes a cap on employers contribution, i.e. that of the government, at 14% so any extra costs are expected to come wholly out of the workers pocket. Reading the small print shows that in the event of any surplus the government is more than happy to take half of any refunds available.

The scheme for new starters is presented in alluring terms with many throwaway benefits but nothing can hide the fact it will mean working longer (at least to 65), paying more for the privilege and getting less. It also ignores the fact that most of the positive improvements have been forced on the schemes

because of changes in legislation - which means that we'd get the good stuff 'imposed' on us, even if we rejected the package currently on offer.

Yet most of the unions are claiming a victory in that both the current right to retire at 60 and the final salary scheme are preserved. UNISON, AMICUS and GMB have all published press releases in which the extra costs are pushed into the small print or simply misrepresented.

Unfortunately it seems most of the unions are prepared to accept the deal without a ballot of their members. UNISON is an exception, with a ballot ongoing in November.

However, the UNISON material for the ballot is shocking, even by their own standards. In the mailing with the ballot paper is a letter from General Secretary Dave Prentis, urging members to vote YES, but not mentioning a single aspect of the new scheme, either good or bad, and an advert for a promotion the union is running to encourage members to recruit their friends a win a holiday at the UNISON holiday camp in Croyde Bay.

UNISON activists concerned about this lack of information will have turned to the two-page article on the deal included in the current issue of 'In Focus' - the union's magazine for activists. But they'd be even more confused after reading this, as it misrepresents the figures and declares that the 6.5% contribution rate is "unchanged" for most members, when in fact it is an increase of half a percent, and that the 5% contribution rate is "a cut" for most low paid members, when it is what they will already be paying. Mis-selling a pension scheme used to be a criminal offence, but it seems the UNISON leadership think they're immune from prosecution.

Time is short, but UNISON members - and other healthworkers where they can - should protest to the union about the way the ballot has been conducted, and demand that a re-run ballot takes place with accurate information provided to all members. In the meantime, we must tell members the truth about the proposals, and encourage them to reject the NHS pension package.

<http://www.workersliberty.org>

This bulletin is produced by supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, a democratic socialist organisation fighting in the unions for a working class, socialist alternative to capitalism and Stalinism.

We organise to promote our ideas, and to foster debate in the trade union movement. We want to see rank-and-file control over the unions, and a labour movement that fights for a society organised

on the basis of solidarity and human need not profits and greed. We stand for unions that fight for their members, and an open and democratic socialist movement which can help to regenerate those unions.

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