

# Government health 'reforms'

## The Con-Dems' future doesn't work

Tens of thousands of health workers' jobs are being axed by NHS trusts. This is a result of billions of pounds of 'efficiency savings' initiated by the previous Labour government and carried on with a vengeance by the Con-Dem coalition. These spending cuts are also leading to the closures of wards and A&E departments in hospitals.

The drive to convert all NHS hospitals to 'Foundation Trust' status – again, initiated by the last Labour government – will cement the NHS's 'internal market' (in which private health care companies now have a significant stake) and accelerate cutbacks and closures.

On top of this assault on the NHS comes the latest health 'reform' plans of the government in its misnamed white paper: 'Equity and excellence: Liberating the NHS'. Its envisaged changes will effectively hand over the bulk of the health budget to privately run corporations whose profit-driven motive will result in further cutbacks and the break-up of the NHS as we know it.

However, the government will face enormous opposition from NHS workers, trade unions, and the wider community in trying to implement this privatisation programme.



Growing anger will greet Con-Dem attacks on the NHS photo A.Hill

### Rob Rooney

Plymouth health workers have been treated to a glimpse of their future – privatised or disappearing services for patients and worse terms and conditions for staff.

Unelected, unaccountable health bosses were due to meet on 17 March to rubber-stamp their decision to turn 1,984 Plymouth primary care trust (PCT) employees over to a 'social enterprise'.

Recently, a meeting of approximately 60 members of Unison Plymouth Community NHS Trust branch heard a health worker from Hull, tell of her experience since Hull PCT became the first in the

country to transfer to a social enterprise in June 2010.

She explained that staff were constantly told there was nothing to worry about, that they wouldn't notice the difference. "We thought 'we've had three changes of name and three changes of people in seven years, this is just another re-structure'. Then slowly people realised 'Oh my God, this is really different'."

The limited safeguards negotiated under Agenda for Change, such as annualised hours, soon went and the number of disciplinary hearings went through the roof.

The health worker warned: "Don't think your contracts will be protected because they won't."

Already, custody nurses have gone over to a private company; the award-winning sexual health service is rumoured to be next. "If it's not profitable, if it costs too much in staff or you can't easily see how it makes money, cuts will be made."

Staff treating drug and alcohol-affected patients have been told it's too expensive to stock bandages.

There has been expansion in one direction – a smart new finance suite, housing an expanded human resources staff, who are looking at existing terms and conditions and policies.

Health bosses have ignored the opinions of staff and have not consulted with the public. In the South West (where there are seven PCTs

set to transfer) Unison had a staff survey with 1,100 responses, all saying 'no'. The strategic health authority (SHA) has no survey at all of public opinion.

Plymouth Unison full-time officer, Claire Jones, said the plan is for PCT staff to be registered as a "community interest company" from 1 April. Staff will be issued with new fixed-term contracts but Claire said they will not be worth the paper they are written on. Unison has obtained a letter from the Department of Health which confirms this.

"You will not be able to enforce it – services will be market-tested and opened up to the private sector. Make no mistake, it's not the NHS any more."

### Fast news

#### Mail closures

Royal Mail bosses plan to axe another 1,700 jobs and close two mail centres – Nine Elms Lane and Bromley-by-Bow – in London. The projected job losses are on top of the 65,000 posts the company has shed since 2002.

The closures are the first tranche of cuts that will result in half the country's mail centres being closed by 2016 unless stopped by workers' action. The closures announcement follows on from the Con-Dems' decision to privatise Royal Mail later this year or next. Clearly Royal Mail bosses, with the government's blessing, are cutting costs to make the company appear more profitable to potential buyers. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) says the closures will mean compulsory redundancies and flies in the face of national agreements between the CWU and Royal Mail.

#### Yemen crisis

The regime of Yemen's beleaguered president Ali Abdullah Saleh is nearing collapse and civil war amidst continuing state orchestrated violence against street protests that led to at least 45 demonstrators being shot dead by plain clothes police firing from rooftops in the capital, Sanaa on 18 March.

In a desperate bid to retain power Saleh has dismissed his government but continues to see support from his close allies haemorrhage. The latest defection is army chief General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar who now claims to back the opposition! Army tanks are now positioned outside the presidential palace, central bank and key ministry buildings. Saleh, who has ruled for 32 years, has said he will defend his regime "with every drop of blood".

But his days could be numbered after a month of continuous protests from demonstrators demanding democratic and social reforms. He also faces a separatist movement in the south as well as trying to suppress Shia tribes in the north.

## EDL thugs threaten socialists

### Elaine Brunskill

Our Socialist Party campaigning activity at Newcastle's Monument was going well on Saturday 19 March. One of us was dressed up as a 'banker in need', thanking people for the billions handed over in bonuses. We had loads of people coming up to our stall, signing our petition, buying our paper. Then suddenly we were surrounded by around 60 English Defence League (EDL) thugs. It seemed as if they had a regional mobilisation.

Initially, they tried to put their racist material on our stall, we threw it off. We asked them why they were targeting our stall, we were fighting the cuts and opposing the massive bonuses being given to the bankers. One of them shouted they didn't mind bankers getting bonuses, as long as they were English!

We were joined by another left group, and a passer-by who stood in front of our stall to help us defend it. We decided to continue campaigning and not leave the EDL unopposed to peddle their reactionary filth to the people of Newcastle.

During a period of a couple of hours we were verbally abused. One of our young female members was completely surrounded by them.

I was told that I was a coward. I replied that maybe it wasn't so very brave of him to be shouting at a 50+ year old woman. I was also covered in EDL stickers and told they were going to 'smash socialists'.

A young person passing by carrying a pro-uprising Libyan flag



EDL thugs photo Paul Mattsson

was met by shouts of "scum, scum, scum". While this was going on people were still approaching our stall, telling us they thought the EDL were a disgrace.

One of the police who was present posed smiling with the EDL. When I criticised her for doing this she told me she often had her photograph taken with tourists and young people at the Monument and could see nothing wrong with what she had done!

The EDL at the Monument seemed intent on having a celebration of ignorance. They were anti-trade unionist, anti-student and anti-working class.

For decades the Monument in Newcastle has been where trade unionists, community activists and socialists have had Saturday stalls. The EDL will face a mobilisation of local trade union members and other lefts if they try to bring their bully tactics back again.

## Pickles wages war on services

### By a Unison member

Tory communities secretary Eric Pickles has declared war on what he calls councils' 'barmy rules and regulations' by conducting a 'review' of the 1,294 statutory duties placed on local authorities.

Most of these arise from Acts of Parliament and cover areas such as housing, social care, fire and rescue, town planning, local democracy and finance, environmental health and so on.

Pickles knows that removing many of these statutory duties is a prerequisite for the mass closure or privatisation of council services. Closure would leave most local authorities with a few hundred staff carrying out commissioning activities or monitoring the much reduced statutory duties that remain.

The Tory/Liberal coalition is already preparing the ground for this with their 'Big Society' Decentralisation and Localism Bill that will introduce a general power of competence. The Bill is already at the report stage in the House of Commons. Local authorities will be able to act in any way they see fit provided it falls within the law. For example, community groups assuming control of services that would otherwise close, the merger of essential services across council boundaries and alternative ways of funding local government such as invest-to-save bonds.

How far Pickles, Clegg and Cameron could go is illustrated by the in-

clusion of 37 adult social care duties that support disabled people and family carers in the Bill. Particularly the duty under section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 (CSDPA) to provide services to disabled people in order to meet their needs.

Although this duty has been significantly weakened by central government underfunding of councils over 30 years, and House of Lords judgements which allow councils to consider their financial position, it is still the foundation stone for the social services relied on by hundreds of thousands.

The Labour peer Alf Morris who wrote the CSDPA has promised to fight 'tooth and nail' to save this duty. But without mass pressure he is unlikely to find much of an echo in his own party.

It was New Labour that introduced the 2003 Fair Access to Care Services policy with differing levels of eligibility which has just been used by Birmingham council to justify ending services to 4,100 disabled and older people.

And Gordon Brown's government supported a Law Commission review that has now recommended a single law for adult social care that would replace the already weakened duty in the CSDPA with a much weaker 'statement of principles'.

Unless Pickles's war on councils is stopped, local government will change beyond all recognition, and disabled and older people, their families and millions of others will face a very bleak future.

#### Fast-tracking the rich

Immigration minister Damian Green has made it easier for oligarchs and the super-rich from abroad to fast-track settlement in the UK. Those who invest £5 million in government bonds will be allowed to settle here after three years, and those investing £10 million or more will be allowed to settle after two years. This compares with the current minimum five-year requirement. "Entrepreneurs and investors can play a major part in our economic recovery, and I want to do everything I can to ensure that Britain remains an attractive destination for them", said Green. Clearly these are the type of people the Tories see as priority immigrants. Not those who labour in the fields picking fruit, nor those who care for our elderly on the minimum wage but the very group of super-rich people - speculators and oligarchs - who were key in wrecking the economy two years earlier!