T he establishment of the NHS in 1948 utterly transformed the lives of working class people. Unsurprisingly the NHS holds a uniquely special place in the consciousness of working class people. But for over 30 years it has faced under-investment and privatisation.

Now the Con-Dems’ Health and Social Care Act (HSCA) aims to end the NHS as we know it, turning it over to multinational companies to make enormous profits. As well as private companies taking over services, NHS hospitals - with their publicly-funded facilities and staff - can now turn half their capacity to private provision. Gradually the principle of ‘free at the point of use’ will be eroded with creeping charges.

Attacks

Alongside this historic change, the NHS faces unprecedented cuts. The so-called ‘ring-fencing’ of NHS funding disguises a cut in real terms of £20 billion. Under the guise of reorganisation, establishing such things as ‘centres of excellence’ (and who could argue with excellence?) general hospitals are hacked, A&Es and maternity units closed, or hospitals shut entirely. And all of this is on top of the scandal of PFI.

This is a battle to defend the core principle of working class people to the NHS, a barrage of horror stories fills the press on an almost daily basis. Of course no one defends poor care, but years of cuts and damaging changes could cause this government to collapse.

Working class

It was the power of the working class that won the NHS in the first place. After World War Two, mass movements of workers, determined not to go back to the deprivations of the 1930s, swept across Europe. The capitalists feared for their system. An election victory for the Labour Party allowed the introduction of the NHS. Thus a crucial factor in winning the NHS was the formation by results. It would mean ending GP consortiums, and ending ‘pay-per-case’ and ‘pay-per-prescription’.

NHS faces unprecedented cuts. The NHS was brought together with patients, have so many tasks and they are responsible for so many people. Amalia Loizidou

I am in a bed in the Sage ward in Whipps Cross hospital. After watching a story on London BBC News describing the staff here as rude and inattentive I was wondering if they are talking about the same hospital.

Every single member of staff has been extremely polite, patient and super attentive! This is even though they are responsible for so many patients, there are so many tasks and are on such long shifts. I’ve been here since 16 September when I spent my afternoon outside the hospital at the protest organised by Waltham Forest Unison health branch to defend the hospital’s services and staff.

After leaving I was violently pushed to the ground by someone running away from the police. The officers called for an ambulance but an hour passed and none ever came because of shortages. In the end I had to go to the hospital in a friend’s car.

Sometimes there are only two nurses in the morning, when all the patients on this ward need help going to the toilet and cleaning ourselves. They are fed-up with the long shifts and the low pay - one told me she can no longer afford school meals for her child. All the staff know about the two protests organised by the Unison branch. They are all pleased that I’m involved in this campaign.

Whipps Cross has a special place in the heart of our community. We must not, and we will not, let it go down in the name of anyone’s filthy profits. Together, community and staff, we must defend our hospital.

A new example is at Whipps Cross in East London, where there is one of the more militant union organisations in the NHS. Of course community campaigning will still be a vital part of the battle to save Whips, bringing the community and users of the NHS together with the workforce. But it is important here that the workers in the hospital have taken the lead. It is they who ultimately have the power to take decisive action, including strike action, which, with the community behind them, could be a powerful weapon.

Even so, gains at a local level always risk the run of being overturned if they remain isolated cases. To defeat the government mass movement will require a powerful mass movement.

The Socialist Party has called for a national trade union demo to defend the NHS - including at June’s Unison health conference, where the right wing leadership rebuffed the ideal - and welcomes the TUC’s demonstration at Tory party conference.

This demo should be a platform to call for national strike action. One and a half million people work in the NHS. If the power of workers in the health service was brought together with patients and communities, a movement could develop which could force the government into significant retreat.

When linked up with other workers in strike action against cuts, in the form of a 24-hour general strike, it could cause this government to collapse.

Democracy

A socialist government would also ensure decent pay and pensions, good quality housing, and shorter working hours. The impact of a decent standard of living for all cannot be overestimated. New figures show that London’s rich live 15 more healthy years than the poor.

Real democratic controls could be introduced with elected committees of health workers, trade unions, community representatives, and representatives of local and national government. These would feed into a national plan, enabling better integration and a reorganisation that genuinely gives people the best possible service.

Patients and staff support campaign to defend Whipps Cross hospital

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Amalia Loizidou

This is not just about Whipps Cross - it’s about the whole community coming together to fight for its survival. They’re saying go to Whitchurch. We don’t want that - we have a very good local hospital here. I work in the emergency department. They’ll get band five nurses to take on the work we specialised workers do. We have to be all part of this fight against privatisation.

Roderick, Whipps Cross nurse
Lessons from the Mid Yorkshire NHS strike

In 1942-1948, after years of struggle by workers, the NHS was introduced. This heralded the welfare state, available to all free at the point of use, funded by contributions from all taxpayers. Since then, the NHS has faced many challenges, including financial crisis, cuts, privatisation, and PFI schemes. The task of every trade unionist in the public sector knows that the political cost of such attacks is too great. The longer the dispute went on the more the strikers felt isolated and the fewer were prepared to fight for the NHS - and in a minority of cases downbandings, there were no compulsory ballots.

Mid Yorkshire NHS strike

Shut down the town to save hospital workers

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April 7th 2001, David O'Malley

Hundreds march to defend Whipp Cross

The NHS spent £5.1 billion on drugs in 1948. At today's prices, this would come to over £12 billion a year on drugs.

Drugs contractors regularly rob the NHS by using a legal loophole called Ramping to push up the price of medicines in some cases by up to 2.5 times. It costs the public purse tens of millions a year.

PFI originated in John Major's first 1997-98 budget as a means to "put the public purse in the market". George Osborne's budget in 2012 recommended that PFI should be replaced. But in the Con-Dems' 2010-15, the Conservative ministers continued with the process of "privatise the NHS". The stick came in the form of a rapid changes in price, and it seldom even then appeared to be put to use. The public sector has effectively lost the state hospital in the first wave.

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Mid Yorkshire NHS Strike - What went wrong?

The NHS, which has been described as "the jewel in the crown of British public services", has become a major factor undermining the foundation on which the NHS is based. The PFI scheme and its ilk, together with other factors, have contributed to the failure of the NHS, which is running a massive financial deficit. There are many reasons for the failure of the NHS, but the central issue is the failure of the Conservative government to provide adequate resources for the NHS and to ensure that it is run efficiently and effectively. The Conservative government's failure to provide adequate resources for the NHS, and to ensure that it is run efficiently and effectively, has contributed to the failure of the NHS.
What can we do to defend the NHS at the ballot box?

Dave Neilist, chair of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) argues for an electoral challenge to defend the NHS.

Hospitals, such as George Elliot in Nuneaton, are under threat of take-over from private sector companies. Channel 4 News recently found that they were using private ambulances in parts of the country, crews by staff who may have as little as five days’ medical training.

The NHS is expected to receive almost £300 million this year from private patients seeking prioritisation, which even the government acknowledged could result in “a growth in waiting lists and waiting times for patients”. Although accelerated over the last three years, hospitals are only using the same powers to raise income from private patients originally given to them by Tony Blair.

More of the same

And there’s the problem. As even Dave Prentis, pro-Labour leader of UNISON, has recognised: “Labour built the bridge that the Tories are marching over.”

Huge demonstrations of tens of thousands (in Stafford, Lewisham and elsewhere) show there is no lack of willingness of people to fight against this health service. And workers are taking action too. But what do we do at election time when all establishments are broadly agree to the direction the NHS is taking? Where do we stand?

The current £20 billion ‘savings’ being imposed on the NHS by the coalition government actually arose from Labour plans. Former Labour ministers are even advising private firms on how to profit from the NHS! Former Labour health secretary Alan Milburn and Patricia Hewitt have earned tens of thousands of pounds a year advising financial companies to specialise in health investments, run private hospitals or provide outsourced services. There is no evidence of winning back the Labour Party to the demand of ‘renationalise the NHS’. Falkirk West showed the reaction of the Labour leadership when Unite attempted to influence the selection of just one MP.

TUSC

Labour now seems permanently wedded to public services run either on market principles, or by big businesses themselves. There is only one organisation planning to stand widely in elections which has pledged support 100% for an NHS publicly funded, publicly delivered, and publicly accountable (by being fully publicly owned) and that’s TUSC.

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TUSC was set-up in 2010 to ensure trade unionists, community campaigners and socialists to stand candidates against the pro-austerity establishment Unite attempted to influence the selection of just one MP. TUSC candidates are pledged to:

• Stop privatisation, including privatising the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public-Private Partnerships (PPP).
• Bring privatised public services and utilities back into public ownership under democratic control.
• A high-quality, free National Health Service under democratic ownership and control.
• The Labour leadership is moving towards abolishing the voice of the organised trade union movement in the Labour Party. It is growing ever more urgent that more trade unions should break the link with New Labour themselves and join with the BMA and leading trade unionists from other unions to found a new party.

As part of the process of building an independent political voice for working class people, TUSC is planning to stand over 600 candidates in next May’s council elections. Around the country meetings will be held to invite active trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigners to come forward. Unlike others, TUSC intends to root itself in the organisations and communities of the working class, unashamedly popularising socialist policies.

Could you be one of next year’s candidates? Find out more at www.tusc.org.uk

Defend NHS Wales from Tory-Labour cuts

Claire Job

Swansea Socialist Party

In England the Health and Social Care Act is dismantling the NHS. In Wales even without the Act, underfunding, years of neglect, poor planning and a spineless Welsh Government are having the same effect. “It’s true the NHS is under threat... in England!” is what we hear too often from union leaders in Wales who claim that the Labour Welsh Government protects the NHS in Wales. At the Wales TUC conference this year there was only one motion out of many to defend the NHS - it was called for a fight against all cuts, and was voted down by union leaders. This does not reflect the mood of members.

Lengthening queues for planned treatments in NHS Cymru’s hospitals is a scandal that is getting worse because of cuts being made by the seven health boards in Wales to meet the Welsh Government’s spending targets. Spending targets have driven change in healthcare services in Wales - for example, we are currently awaiting news from the South Wales Programme consultation which would cut the number of A&Es in south Wales to just five serving two million people! Which hospitals are about to get downgraded? Which local community will have significantly reduced access to emergency and critical care beds?

Privatisation

It’s true that in Wales we have been spared the naked privatisation of healthcare seen in England but the NHS in Wales is not free of market forces. The Welsh Government’s Public Accounts Committee is asking for an investigation into claims that patients in Wales are able to jump lengthening queues for NHS care by paying to see the same doctor privately.

The Welsh Audit Office have alleged that cost-cutting measures are behind many of the 13,000 operations cancelled in Welsh Hospitals since 2010-11, due to either a lack of staff or lack of beds. Also that Wales will have the lowest spending per head on healthcare of any country in the UK in 2014-15. Even all the cuts to services, beds and staff have not been enough to make all the savings that the Labour Welsh Government has been asking for and, in each of the last three years, they have had to come up with extra funding in the last months of the financial year to ensure that health boards stayed within their spending limits.

For patients, however, the potential consequences of these cuts are much more serious than missed performance targets. There have been a reported 152 deaths of patients on waiting lists for cardiac surgery in Cardiff’s UHW and Swansea’s Morriston Hospital in the last five years, for instance.

As late as this May, at the Wales TUC, Welsh First Minister, Carwyn Jones, was claiming that savings would not be made through redundancies of NHS staff in Wales. The conference was barely over before that claim was being proved false - the Cardiff and Vale Health Board is in the final stages of a consultation over 324 redundancies.

It is not just a question of health workers and trade unionists in Wales showing solidarity and providing sympathy for our brothers and sisters in England. Whether the cuts are being implemented by the Con-Dem or Labour, we are united in the same fight to defend the NHS. The allies we can rely on in this struggle are not Labour politicians who implement NHS cuts but the millions of working class people who rely on and value their NHS.

The Socialist Party fights for:

• No cuts. Axe the Act: Abolish the Health and Social Care Act which prepares the way for the further selling off of our NHS to private organisations.
• A fully publicly funded NHS, free for all at the point of use.
• End big business profiteering from the NHS: Abandon the Private Finance Initiative which is bleeding the NHS dry.
• End NHS job losses and low pay. No downgrading.
• Nationalise the pharmaceutical and medical supply industries and all private health providers.
• Democratic control and accountability of health services.
• United action to defend the NHS – the TUC must name the day for a 24-hour general strike against austerity.
• A new mass workers’ party that fights for these demands. Support the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition as a step in this direction.
• A socialist planned society that can genuinely meet and exceed the original aims of the NHS.

The government is refusing to introduce minimum safe staffing levels into hospitals, despite the recommendations of the Francis report into the Mid Staffordshire Trust catastrophe in which 1,200 patients ‘needlessly died’.

Earlier this year drug company executive were secretly recorded boasting that they are selling regulated prescription drugs that cost “pennies” for hundreds of pounds because the government won’t tighten NHS price controls.