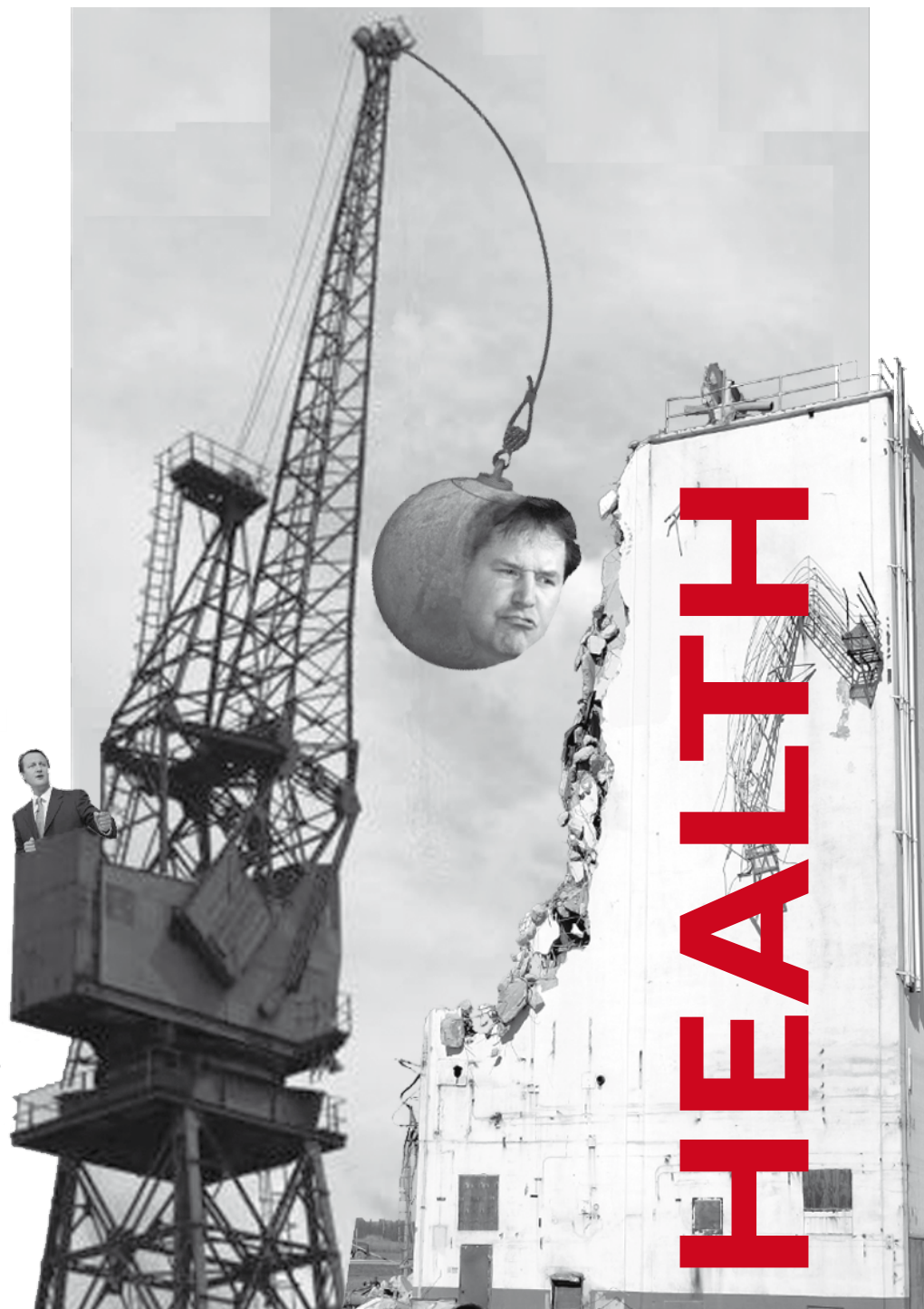


NHS CUTS: Stop the Con-Dem wreckers



graphics Suzanne Beishon

Neil Cafferky

Tory minister Andrew Lansley's Health and Social Care Bill threatens the break-up of the NHS. What the bill introduces, such as contracting out GP services to private groups and companies, is bad enough. But an even greater danger lies in what the Bill takes away from the NHS.

The NHS was designed to be a comprehensive health service free at the point of use, funded by taxes and publicly accountable to elected representatives locally and nationally.

Previous governments, Tory and New Labour, undermined this ethos by bringing private companies into the NHS. The most obvious examples are the private finance initiative (PFI) deals enthusiastically sponsored by Labour, despite their huge expense and the massive profits creamed off.

The Con-Dems' Health and Social Care Bill, however, undermines the NHS as a comprehensive public health care system. Part 1, Section 1, Clause 1 of the Bill would remove the government's 'duty of care' to provide a comprehensive service.

This duty of care for example allowed women suffering from cervical cancer to compel the government to provide Herceptin to treat their illness. More importantly it ensures the government is required to provide a basic minimum health service throughout the country.

Once this duty is removed it will allow for private operators to decide (on the basis of profit) what type of health services are provided or not.

So, less well off areas will find more expensive treatments harder to access locally while more affluent areas may retain a more comprehensive service but at a higher cost.

The Bill will also spell the end of national pay agreements for NHS staff while at the same time removing the limit on how much NHS providers can charge patients for treatment.

These plans, to bring private profit into the heart of the NHS, have met huge public opposition. So, with elections in view, the Con-Dem government has announced a "pause" in implementing the Bill. But all three main parties are committed to further marketisation of the NHS.

Delegates at the conference of Unison union health workers gasped in disbelief as Labour shadow health secretary John Healy extolled the virtues of PFI and said that private companies could help the NHS.

The NHS is under attack in every area. Hospital trusts have now been warned that they will be expected to make 50% deeper 'savings', ie cuts, than before - and that figure was already £20 billion!

The unions in the health service urgently need to link up with local NHS campaigns and anti-cuts bodies with a comprehensive plan, up to and including strike action, to resist both these cuts and the further marketisation of the health service.

We also need to build a mass party that is fully committed to protecting and extending the NHS as a publicly owned, democratically accountable health service.

Don't let the government get away with these attacks. It's time for a fightback!

March to save the NHS

Tuesday 17 May
5.30pm, University College Hospital,
Gower St, WC1
6pm march to Department of Health,
Whitehall, SW1

Health workers, trade unionists and members of the local community protested on 28 April at horrific proposals to cut local community mental health services in east London. 97 of the current 200 workers who cover three of the country's poorest boroughs, Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Newham, would go.

"I'm still fighting the cuts for my grandkids" said Marcia, who is about to retire. Ruth Benbow, Unison member and health worker, added: "I'm really concerned about cuts to frontline services and what the impact might be on service users. I'm worried about the future for the whole NHS if the cuts go ahead, my fear is the NHS all being privatised."

The magnificent 26 March TUC demonstration had a big impact. The next step in the battle against all cuts is the coordinated strike action on 30 June involving civil servants, teachers and possibly other groups of public sector workers.

Naomi Byron