

UK Health Secretary Wes Streeting rolls out Labour's first attacks on NHS

Robert Stevens
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Britain's Labour government has begun rolling out its National Health Service (NHS) privatisation programme, and clampdown on health workers' pay.

The measures were outlined in Health Secretary Wes Streeting's keynote speech at Labour's annual conference.

Streeting framed his right-wing policies with the cynical claim that the best, i.e. private, healthcare should be accessible to the poorest and not only those who can afford it. He cited Claire, a stage four cancer patient, whose employer offered a private health insurance scheme and who "for the first time in her life" used it.

"Every cancer patient deserves world-class care. But for every person like Claire, who was able to go private, there are thousands more who can't," said Streeting, who has nothing genuine to say about the savage cuts that have made waiting lists so long.

Streeting noted his recently commissioned report authored by Lord Darzi, "a cancer surgeon with 30 years' experience," who led "an independent investigation into our National Health Service." Darzi had found, "100,000 toddlers and babies left waiting for six hours in A&E last year; Cancer—more likely to be a death sentence here than in other countries; Nearly three million people off work sick; Waiting lists at record highs; Patient satisfaction at a record low."

Streeting blamed this on the previous Conservative government's plan "for the NHS: mismanaged decline", before insisting that "We can only deliver recovery through reform"—his go-to description of privatisation and attacks on healthcare workers.

Having previously stated in columns in the pro-Tory press that "We are not going to have a something-for-nothing culture in the NHS with Labour," and threatening "I'm not prepared to pour money into a black hole", Streeting told the conference, "Without reform to services, we'll end up putting in more cash for poorer

results."

He boasted that in the few weeks since he took office, "We cut red tape, found the funding, and we'll have 1,000 more GPs treating patients."

That was the only NHS spending announced in his speech.

All Labour's top personnel—Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, Chancellor Rachel Reeves, and Streeting—have declared since taking power that one of their priority missions to "save the economy" is to clear the welfare rolls and force hundreds of thousands of sick people back into work.

Streeting told the conference, "Ending the junior doctor strikes [with a union-agreed settlement maintaining low pay] was central to our commitment to deliver 40,000 more appointments a week.

"But as well as getting staff back to work, we need to get them working at the top of their game.

"We're sending crack teams of top clinicians to hospitals across the country to roll out reforms—developed by surgeons—to treat more patients and cut waiting lists.

"And I can announce today that the first twenty hospitals targeted by these teams will be in areas with the highest numbers of people off work sick."

His other innovations were largely nonsensical soundbites such as, "From analogue to digital, from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention".

His "10-year plan" is entirely based on how best to deepen the growing stranglehold of the private corporations in the NHS.

Returning to this theme, he said: "When the wealthy receive a diagnosis, they already know the best surgeons and can push to get the best care. But working people can't. If the wealthy are told to wait months for treatment, they can shop around. But working people can't. And if they pay top dollar, the wealthy can be treated with cutting-edge equipment and technology. But working

people can't...

“Our ten-year plan will give all patients—rich and poor alike—the same information, the same choice, the same control.”

Labour, “will ensure patients’ right to choose where they are treated, and we will build up local health services so it’s a genuine choice.

“And where there’s capacity in the private sector, patients should be able to choose to go there too, free at the point of use, paid for by the NHS.”

Streeting said of his privatisation agenda, “I know there are some on the left who cringe at this. Who view choice as somehow akin to marketisation.”

This is the position not just of “some on the left”, but millions of workers in the NHS and among those who depend on it.

Streeting’s idol, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, first set up an “internal market” in the NHS in 1989-1990, which paved the way for the massive use of the Private Finance Initiative projects—ultimately saddling the NHS with around £80 billion in collective debt—by his other hero, Tony Blair.

Introducing research on the relationship between regional levels of NHS privatisation and the rates of people dying from curable causes published in August 2023, Oxford University’s Department of Social Policy and Intervention noted, “England’s NHS is being steadily privatised as each year more and more patients are being treated in the private sector. Last year over 2 million NHS patients were treated by private companies, just short of 10% of all treatments—which is up from around 3% in 2011.”

They added, “The work found steady increases in the amounts that the NHS is spending on for-profit companies through analysis of data that showed over 11 billion pounds flowing from the NHS to for-profit private companies between 2013 and 2019.”

Refuting Streeting’s claim that handing more of the NHS over to the private sector meant the opening of great new health opportunities for all, the introduction adds, “The research also found that privatisation corresponded with more people dying of treatable causes, calculating an estimate of 557 additional deaths that might be attributed to increases in privatisation between 2013 and 2019.”

As Ben Goodair, one of the Doctoral researchers, noted, “The implications are that privatising the NHS is not corresponding with better quality care, and, starkly, that the inverse might be true.”

Streeting has been hailed to the rafters by the

Thatcherite press, who have supplied him with reams of column space, on the basis of his insistence that the NHS is “a service, not a shrine”; which has to end its “begging bowl culture”; is “going to have to get used to the fact that money is tight”; and that further private sector takeover of services is a necessity.

Leading figures in the opposition Tory party have now come forward to profess their own admiration.

In a House of Commons debate on Darzi’s report Monday, Streeting boasted, “When the shadow Secretary of State [Victoria Atkins] stands up, I wonder whether she can tell us whether she agrees with the Honourable Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who said: ‘I applaud Wes Streeting for having the political courage. I think only Labour can really say this. The NHS is sort of their thing... I really hope that we can get behind him’”.

Streeting noted, “It is not just [Tory] backbenchers. What about the Shadow Foreign Secretary, the right honourable Member for Sutton Coldfield, Andrew Mitchell? He said: ‘I’m very supportive of what Wes Streeting is saying... The Conservative government put a lot of money into the NHS, the record is there for all to see... I’m not one of those who is seeking to attack... the Labour Party on the NHS.’”

Streeting concluded, “Let me move to my favourite comments on the NHS from a Tory MP,” citing Robert Jenrick, who recently revealed in a bid to bolster support for his becoming leader of the Tory Party that one of his daughter’s middle names is “Thatcher”.

Jenrick, said Streeting, had bemoaned how the Tories when in power “shirked the difficult decisions [over the NHS]... If Wes Streeting comes forward with genuine reforms I think we should back him.”

There is literally nothing to distinguish the Labour Party from the Tories on health, or any other policy. Whichever is in government, they constitute a de facto single party of austerity, privatisation and war.

NHS FightBack, established by the Socialist Equality Party and affiliated to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, seeks to organise workers throughout the healthcare sector. Fill in the form and get involved today.



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