

Unison offers no opposition to Dorset National Health Service privatisation plan: Build a rank-and-file committee!

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Public sector union Unison hosted a Zoom meeting for National Health Service (NHS) workers across three health trusts in Dorset, England over the proposed transfer and outsourcing of nearly 1,300 staff into a newly created private subsidiary company (SubCo).

Ahead of last week's meeting, local Unison leaders claimed it would "update where we are at and to be clear we aim to stop this." But over a more than hour-long session, they offered no concrete plan to halt the outsourcing of vital workers—porters, housekeeping, catering, and estates staff—into a SubCo in a transparent privatisation operation.

No collective resistance was proposed, despite the Dorset trust's plan for a SubCo that it would wholly own being in place and workers transferred by September.

When news of the proposed SubCo emerged earlier this month, workers received a WhatsApp message from Unison reps proposing a three stage plan consisting of 1) a protest during days off; 2) a work to rule; followed by 3) consideration of strike action as a last resort. By last week's meeting even this limited campaign was ditched.

Instead Unison officials urged workers to spend their time writing to Members of Parliament--four from the Labour Party, two Conservatives and two Liberal Democrats)--NHS trust boards, and governors who are the architects of the privatization plan.

With workers already losing all faith in the union, Gareth Drinkwater, Unison Branch secretary at University Hospitals Dorset Trust and chair of the meeting, was left to beg, "If you are not a member of a union, my desperate appeal is for you to join Unison. We need you to. This will give us the best chance of

stopping these changes going ahead."

Unison local organiser Laurie Hackney maintained the same line but also insisted that without more members industrial action was unthinkable. "A strike is a last resort. If it comes to a strike or protest or mass gathering, we need as close as we can get to 100% because we cannot do it half-cocked. Any kind of collective action requires more members, numbers."

Every argument possible was advanced as to why industrial action was ruled out, with one union rep even arguing that organising a strike ballot is "expensive". This from a representative of the largest public sector union in the country with over 1.2 million members—with over half a million of these employed in the NHS.

According to its last annual return covering the year to December 2023, Unison pulled in an income--mainly from members' dues--of over £185 million. Workers are supposed to believe that the union can't afford to organise a strike ballot in Dorset, yet it can pay its bureaucracy a collective £80 million annually in renumeration and expenses.

This is a deliberate strategy to paralyze any action, aimed at protecting the union's collaboration with management.

Workers must reject the claim that a fight cannot begin until every worker is unionised. That so many NHS workers are not union members is not their failure—it is an indictment of the unions themselves. Time and again, they have sold out struggles and undermined resistance.

In 2011, 2.5 million public sector workers mobilized against pension cuts—only to be betrayed by the Trades Union Congress, to which Unison is affiliated, when it

accepted the Tory government's terms. Over the past 15 years, Unison has agreed to pay caps, pay freezes, and below-inflation increases, leading to a dramatic erosion of NHS workers' pay.

In 2018, Unison and other unions agreed to a rotten pay deal that not only slashed sickness enhancement pay for Bands 1–3, but also helped dismantle the NHS's incremental pay progression. The Royal College of Nursing recommended it to members calling it "the best deal in eight years." Unison's head of health, Sara Gorton, falsely claimed this deal would "make staff feel more valued" and "lift morale." In reality, it did the opposite.

Even more damning was their role during the initial year of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Over 1,500 health workers died, many due to lack of PPE, as unions like Unison stood by and enforced the Tory government's criminal "herd immunity" strategy.

With Labour Health Secretary Wes Streeting now openly accelerating NHS privatization and launching a Trump type jobs cull in the NHS, Unison General Secretary Christina McAnea welcomed him with open arms to the union's national health conference this month.

At Tuesday's meeting, union leaders avoided any mention of Labour's nationwide drive to establish subsidiary companies and the need for a unified, national struggle to fight these bodies that every understood were privatisation vehicles as soon as they were introduced by the Blair Labour government in 2006. Workers in dozens of other trusts face similar attacks as those in Dorset, and Unison's strategy is to keep them divided.

Drinkwater said that management has failed to provide even the most basic information, as if that was the main issue: "They haven't given us a single document. As a branch, we are absolutely entitled to that," he complained.

But the implications are already clear. Under SubCo, workers face the loss of NHS pensions, pay protections, and enhancements for unsocial hours—in short, the gutting of hard-won rights and conditions. Every new SubCo paves the way for further privatisation.

Since their introduction by Labour, SubCos expanded under successive Tory governments. By 2018, 42 NHS Foundation Trusts had launched or were developing SubCos. A year later, there were over 65.

confirmed that SubCo staff are routinely:

- * Paid less than NHS rates
- * Denied access to the NHS pension scheme
- * Given reduced unsocial hours pay
- * Offered employer pension contributions as low as 3%—compared to 20.68% under NHS terms

Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government is insisting on the creation of SubCos in NHS trusts as a means to impose the required "efficiency savings", as Streeting insists that no extra funding be thrown into the NHS "black hole" and that it end a "begging bowl culture".

In opposition to the unions calling on workers to politely participate in hospital meetings about transferring over to a SubCo that can only worsen their conditions, NHS FightBack urges staff to boycott these sham briefings and management-led consultations. These sessions serve only to legitimize sweeping cost-cutting attacks carried out at the expense of hardworking healthcare workers.

This situation demands not more empty appeals to the perpetrators of cuts and privatisation, but a genuine fightback. That means building independent rank-and-file committees, outside the control of the union bureaucracy, to organise collective action—up to and including strikes—based on a socialist programme in opposition to the destruction of the NHS.

- Defend our jobs, pay, pensions, and conditions!
 - Boycott briefings and management-led consultations over SubCo!
 - Stop SubCos now!
 - For a unified struggle by NHS workers facing outsourcing and inferior contracts!
 - Build rank-and-file committees to fight back!

To NHS workers in Dorset and nationally, share your stories with the World Socialist Web Site and contact NHS FightBack to link up with other healthcare workers in the struggle to secure high-quality healthcare for all, provided by a valued and supported workforce. Visit our Facebook page and X account here.



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