



GMB CONGRESS 2011

CEC STATEMENT ON THE FUTURE OF THE NHS

SUMMARY

- GMB has *no confidence* in the unelected Coalition Government's management of the health service in England.
- GMB is wholly opposed to the Health and Social Care Bill which dismantles and privatises the NHS.
- The ability of staff to deliver patient care is deteriorating: waiting times are up, and more treatments are being rationed.
- NHS staff are bearing the brunt: there is growing job insecurity and downward pressure on terms and conditions.
- GMB calls on the Coalition to abandon the Health Bill and give the NHS the fair funding settlement it was promised.
- GMB will continue to campaign against the Government's "reforms", to champion a publicly-run NHS, and to represent and organise NHS workers.

END OF THE NHS?

The Tory-Lib Government is planning major "reforms" which will dismantle the NHS as we know it:

Abolishing Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities. PCTs and SHAs coordinate the NHS locally in the interests of patients. In future, consortias of GPs will have to buy-in the services they want direct, and they will be able to charge patients for services that are currently provided free by the NHS. The Health Bill exposes GPs to conflicts of interest by allowing them to profit from their procurement decisions around patient care.

Throwing open the NHS to full private competition. A new regulator will enforce competition law in the NHS. GPs will be legally obliged to "shop around" for services. It is clear from civil servant evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee that the Coalition *will* allow competition based on price. The system is designed to make hospitals close if they cannot compete in the marketplace.

Forcing all remaining NHS trusts to convert to Foundation Trust status. Foundation Trusts are semi-independent and have more ability to change staff terms and conditions. They will also be allowed to prioritise as many fee-paying patients as they like.

The "reforms" are bundled together in the Health and Social Care Bill currently going through Parliament. But even without this legislation, the Government is already running down the health service:

Underfunding the NHS. The NHS faces a four-year budget freeze despite the Coalition having pledged to increase NHS spending in real terms every year. This is on top of £20bn of "efficiency savings". There is growing job insecurity and downward pressure on terms and conditions, e.g. downbanding. There are over 50,000 confirmed, planned and potential NHS job losses. Yet Health Secretary Andrew Lansley is willing to waste upwards of £3bn on implementing his "reforms". The devolved administrations will also have to contend with budget cuts from Westminster.

Targeting staff pensions. The Government plans to combine a two-year pay freeze with a multi-pronged attack on NHS staff pensions: increasing employee contribution levels, raising the retirement age, cutting the benefits, reducing the inflation protection for pensions in payment and threatening the pension provision of staff who get outsourced.

Making patients wait longer for treatment. Targets for GP referrals and 999 response times have been scrapped, and the 4-hour target for A&E waiting times has been diluted. A recent survey by Pulse magazine found that "GPs have observed increasing waiting times for their patients across a wide range of specialties, with even referrals for cancer investigation delayed in some areas".

GMB'S POSITION

GMB, the union for NHS workers, is wholly opposed to what the Government is doing to the NHS. While we don't simply oppose all reform, we would only ever support reform that retains the founding principles of the NHS: free at the point of use, from the cradle to the grave, provided by the State.

Central to the Tory campaign at the last election was their cynical promise to protect the NHS. David Cameron was well aware that public mistrust about their commitment to the NHS had helped them to lose three General Elections in a row. As soon as the Coalition came into power, they tabled proposals to tear the NHS apart.

If the Government's "reforms" get through, the NHS will be fully exposed to private companies seeking profits from the public purse. Competition will put the future viability of every NHS trust in doubt. (The Government has shown rank incompetence by pushing ahead with plans for greater competition *before* putting in place measures to ensure continuity of services in the event that a provider goes bust.) Patients who can't afford to go private will be left with sub-standard care—this will no longer be a universal service. Our NHS members will have their hard-fought conditions of service obliterated: Agenda for Change, which overall meant fairer pay for non-medical staff, will be in serious jeopardy.

At the time of writing, the Health and Social Care Bill is set to resume its passage through Parliament. Despite all the Lib Dem hand-wringing, so far the Coalition has made no major concessions. Far from acting to restrain his ministers, David Cameron is actually in

the vanguard of the Tory-Lib project to privatise the NHS. Cameron's "kitchen cabinet" of health experts includes a KPMG representative who just six months ago told a conference of private healthcare executives that "in future, the NHS will be a state insurance provider, not a state deliverer"—adding "the NHS will be shown no mercy and the best time to take advantage of this will be in the next couple of years". But opposition to the health "reforms" is growing both within the health service and the general public. It remains to be seen if the Government can push all or part of its proposals through. The fact is that the NHS is already deteriorating under Tory-Lib stewardship.

CONCLUSION

GMB is challenging the Tory-Lib agenda at every opportunity and we have campaigned to bring to everyone's attention what the "reforms" really mean: the dismantling of the NHS. GMB members have lobbied Coalition MPs at Westminster and in constituencies and we have told the Health Secretary what we think of his plans to his face. We have given evidence to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee which is scrutinising the Health Bill. We have helped to set up a new "All Together for the NHS" campaign group coordinated by the TUC, which led to a nationwide NHS Day of Action in April involving lunchtime workplace protests and local lobbying of MPs. Meanwhile our media work has included releases on waiting times, ambulance service cuts, and GP bonuses.

GMB is fully committed to organising and representing NHS workers across all levels of the health service. This will be key to how the Union responds to the threats faced by members to their terms and conditions. We have launched a new monthly newsletter for NHS members. Our NHS National Advisory Group, including representatives of ambulance and community nurses, unanimously rejected a national employer proposal to freeze increment pay. We have since co-produced new joint trade union bargaining advice for local staff sides.

On the pensions issue, GMB conducted a survey of members which found that up to a third of NHS workers will consider leaving their pension scheme if the Government hikes up the contribution rate. This has bolstered our argument against unfair pensions changes in evidence to Lord Hutton's review. Our Pensions team has produced a presentation for workplace meetings and offered training for reps and officers.

As the political debate about the NHS enters a critical phase, GMB will continue to campaign against the Health Bill, to champion a publicly-run NHS, and to represent and organise NHS workers. The Tories and Lib Dems have broken every promise they ever made about protecting the NHS. Their "reforms" are an unwarranted attack on a much-loved public service. We call on the Coalition Government to abandon the Health Bill and to give the NHS the fair funding settlement it was promised.