

GMB CONGRESS 2014

CEC STATEMENT: UPDATE ON THE FUTURE OF THE NHS

SUMMARY

- GMB continues to have no confidence in the unelected Coalition Government's management of the National Health Service in England.
- GMB continues to call for the repeal of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 which dismantles and privatises the NHS. Billions of pounds of NHS Services have already been outsourced.
- Services are deteriorating under Coalition policies – treatments are being rationed, waiting times are up, A&E is in crisis and NHS staff morale is at an all-time low.
- NHS staff are bearing the brunt while private providers prosper and the recent announcement by Government to impose a NHS pay cap is an insult to every hard working NHS staff. We have some way to go to achieve 'fair pay' for NHS workers.
- GMB strength in our GMB NHS workplaces is in our numbers, and we continue to generate activities to support GMB NHS Workplace Reps who are working continuously to organise, represent and consolidate GMB membership.
- Our NHS is being attacked and it's in the interests of our members and their families that the GMB continues to build and strengthen the NHS campaign
 - against the Government's privatisation and cuts agenda
 - to champion a publicly-run NHS, and to effectively recruit, organise and represent NHS workers in the GMB.
 - to retain a NHS for future generations.
 - continue to generate activity and mobilise support from the public for the NHS and for NHS workers.

THE NHS UNDER THE COALITION

In 2011, the CEC warned that the Coalition government 'reforms' threatened to dismantle the NHS on a scale never seen before.

Since then, the Tories supported by the Lib Dems have made a raft of changes – abolishing PCTs and replacing them with a vast new layer of bureaucracy; pressing ahead with an internal market for healthcare; paving the way for wholesale privatisation; and watering down local democratic decision making. All their policies are designed to break up and privatise the health service, and once again NHS staff have been made to bear the brunt of a vast top-down reorganisation, and attacks on their hard fought terms and working conditions.

Underfunding the NHS

The claim that NHS funding would be protected has also been exposed as a lie. Everyone who works in the NHS knows there is a funding crisis. 7,000 nurses and many more NHS workers have been axed since 2010, hospitals are operating at dangerous capacity, and NHS Trusts up and down the country are facing financial turmoil- putting patients, services and staff at risk. The narrative increasingly becoming the norm is the under funding of the NHS. Hospital financial targets not being met due to unrealistic efficiency targets. Hospitals being put into special measures, hospital services being downgraded or closed down. A toxic mix to pave the way for the market to come in and take its lion share.

PFI debt is crippling NHS services and the ability for some trusts to remain solvent is becoming impossible. We need a concerted effort to either renegotiate PFI debt or for govt to step in and support trusts facing difficulty in balancing their books. The consequences otherwise are patients

will suffer. PFI may have led to one of the largest hospital building programmes, shiny new hospitals are little use when PFI debt is crippling NHS finances. If PFI debt is not reviewed and bold alternatives not found PFI legacy will lead to biggest NHS hospital and bed closure programme in the next decade and the closure of beds has already started.

Attacking pay and conditions

NHS staff are being made to work longer, do more to cover the gaps in staffing, and morale is at rock bottom as dedicated health professionals see a return to the dark days of previous Tory governments. It's against this background that NHS staff are now being insulted by a pay offer that doesn't even come close to maintaining their living costs. This comes just a year after NHS employers pushed through detrimental changes to Agenda for Change. The same employers that tried to use sleight of hand to deprive ambulance service staff of some of their basic working allowances. Meanwhile, the Tory Health Secretary has returned billions of NHS underspends to the Treasury. Work harder, longer for less, so privateers can profit that's the Coalition's deal for staff in the NHS.

Targeting staff pensions

The Government has now carried out its plan to greatly reduce the value of the NHS Pension Scheme meaning that staff are harder pressed by having to pay higher contributions and face the prospect of longer working to receive an equivalent pension. This comes on top of the move to CPI which cut the value of pensions in payment.

Privatising health

Not content with bringing in privatisation laws in the UK, the Coalition are also doing all they can to make sure their corporate friends can plunder the NHS even if their disastrous policies lose them the election.

The Government has been aggressively driving forward the creation and expansion of "mutuals" across the full range of health and public services in England. Most of these companies have little or no employee control or ownership and are commercial wolves in sheep's clothing, complicit in the Government policy of privatisation of NHS and wider public services by the back door.

GMB led a campaign of opposition at EU level in 2013 when the UK Government then pushed for an article in the revised EU public procurement rules (making it a condition of their overall agreement) to allow reserved contracts in the health and social services sectors for mutuals, to effectively ring fence contracts for their business buddies.

The US-EU trade deal currently being negotiated – TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and investment partnership) – presents a further threat of liberalisation and privatisation of the NHS and wider public services. Powerful US private health insurance corporations are already maximising opportunities under the Coalition Government's large-scale privatisation of the NHS, to the extent that their infiltration of the health service draws into question our ability to hold on to the crucial principle of a healthcare service free at the point of delivery and guarantee of universal access to high-quality, safe and affordable services for all.

The proposed introduction in the agreement of the dangerous investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) will effectively limit the power of national governments and public authorities to make policy decisions in the public interest, whilst giving unelected and unaccountable foreign businesses and investors unprecedented control to challenge state actions which they perceive to be a threat to their private investment. The scope for any future government to return the NHS to public sector could face challenge under this system as has already happened in *Achmea v. the Slovak Republic* case in relation to their government's attempt to reverse health privatisation policy.

Emergency services in crisis

The cracks are already beginning to show as a result of Coalition policy, most notably in the emergency services we all rely on. In the past year we've witnessed the disgraceful sights of tents set up outside A&E's to hold emergency patients who can't be admitted fast enough. Our elderly, waiting in corridors to be admitted on wards because community services are in meltdown. Dozens of A&E departments across the country face closure or downgrading.

Making patients wait longer for treatment

Labour's waiting time targets have been scrapped or diluted under the Coalition, but that doesn't hide the fact that people are now waiting unacceptable times from diagnosis to treatment. Over 23,000 people each week now wait more than four hours to get seen at A&E, and once they are admitted over 5,000 wait between 4 and 12 hours to get to a hospital bed.

GMB'S POSITION

GMB, the union for NHS workers, is wholly opposed to what the Government has done, and continues to do 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.

The speed at which the Coalition have sought to break up the NHS is bewildering, but GMB has committed to fighting and campaigning against cuts, privatisation - simply put - the big sell off of the NHS. With only a year until the general election, we're also challenging the Labour Party to take the bold action needed to rescue the NHS. It is without doubt that the NHS will feature as one of the key platforms on which an election could be won.

The diagnosis is critical, but not yet terminal.

On the national stage, GMB has lobbied and campaigned to halt the pace of the government's agenda. With the Lib-Dems callously propping up Tory policies in Parliament it has been difficult. The hospital closure clause 119, which the GMB and everyone who cares about hospital services campaigned against, has gone through despite all our efforts. However, important concessions were forced from the government due to the strength of our collective opposition.

At a European and International level, GMB is taking a leading role in opposing the socially destructive TTIP, and will campaign to block further privatisation of the NHS and wider public services and utilities through such trade agreements.

GMB continues to campaign for the removal of reserved public contracts for mutuals - effectively privatisation by the back door in the health and other public services, and calls on a future Labour Government to delete this article.

Most of all, GMB is committed through our industrial strength to fighting the break up of the NHS and the attacks on its staff in every workplace they occur in.

When we prepared to ballot our ambulance service members on the imposed cuts to their terms and conditions, the employers backed down and paid the money back. The ambulance dispute is far from over but, a year on, cuts to sickness pay have not occurred - testament that strength in membership is indisputably the key to retaining hard fought terms and conditions.

The next national fight hitting the NHS is on the Government's insulting pay cap and the blatant undermining of the current collective bargaining arrangements which needs to be the key campaign in every workplace across the NHS.

Organising and developing campaigns on the NHS is not just a reactive campaign by the GMB, it is through identifying the NHS as a national project that we continue to grow our membership and our industrial strength. But our efforts in organising and consolidating membership is just scratching the surface. We welcome the month on month sustained growth in the NHS. This is primarily down to the frontline NHS Workplace Reps who work tirelessly day in day out.

Sustained membership growth over the next year will be crucial in supporting efforts to retain hard fought terms and conditions.

Similar to the decades of local government privatization, the next phase of organising in the NHS is crucial if we are to effectively respond to the threats of the big NHS sell off. Retaining members will increasingly become a challenge if we are to grow the sector.

CONCLUSION

GMB is challenging the Tory-Lib agenda at every opportunity and we continue to campaign to bring to everyone's attention what the "reforms" really mean: the dismantling of the NHS. Through our actions and through making links with local NHS campaign groups as well as the TUC's "All Together for the NHS" campaign group we have kept the public informed of what is happening to our most cherished public service. Much more needs to be done and the need to continue to build links with local communities who are standing up and fighting to retain their local NHS services is essential if we are all going to retain a NHS for future generations.

With one eye on the next election, we need to make sure the Labour Party continues to hear loud and clear what GMB members want from their national health service – a state run, first rate service, free for all and staffed by a professional and respected workforce. The noises so far from the shadow health team are encouraging, but we will continue to push for the firm commitments to repeal damaging legislation and support NHS workers, going into the next Labour manifesto.

The GMB central campaign platform in the NHS is the effective and robust representation of terms and conditions of NHS workers. GMB needs to continue to build effective campaigning and profile raising so the GMB becomes the union of choice for NHS workers.

As we continue the fight to save the NHS, GMB is determined to use every industrial and political tool at our disposal to protect our members, our public services, our communities and ultimately our National Health Service.