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NHS England and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Anarchist Communist Group

6th April 2020

“One sad conclusion of the confused, fragmented, and variable response of the NHS to COVID-19 is that...we do not have a National Health Service at all.”

*Professor Richard Horton, Editor in Chief, The Lancet,
April 1st 2020*

After more than a decade of financial cuts, fragmentation, part-privatisation, frozen salaries and massive shortages of staff, what remains of our public health service is on its knees, struggling to deal with a pandemic that has swept the world.

Everywhere posters, newspaper headlines, television and Facebook proclaim their support for “our NHS heroes”. Frontline health workers face sickness and death for themselves and their families dealing with the effects of the virus.

The same politicians, so-called celebrities and newspapers have stood by in silence for more than ten years while the NHS has been dismembered and de-staffed by successive governments, Labour, Coalition, and Conservative. These governments were voted into

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power by many of the public who now stand on their doorsteps and balconies applauding the dedication of health workers.

Meanwhile health workers don't have the hospital beds, the ventilators, the appropriate protective clothing or the testing facilities to cope with the surge of patients. Up to 25% of staff in some hospitals are not able to work due to suspected COVID-19 symptoms in themselves or their households. This is in a health service already faced with a shortage of 40,000 nurses and 10,000 doctors (*Daily Mirror*, 2 April 2020).

What has happened to the private sector expertise and efficiency we were told the health service needed? It seems that senior management, administrators and planners are incapable of procuring and distributing the necessary supplies of chemicals, PPE and technology needed to deal with a pandemic. This despite David Cameron's boast to EU leaders as long ago as 2015 in the wake of the Ebola crisis that Britain would lead the way in preparing for another virus pandemic.

It is inevitable when COVID-19 subsides, or its effects are tamed through vaccination that there will be a huge public demand for changes to our health services. Never again! Politicians will blame their specialist advisors, the advisors will blame their academic critics and everybody will join in blaming the inadequacies of Public Health England. Large sums of money will be promised to restore the capabilities of the NHS, but only "when the country can afford it". This will be after the biggest slump since the 1930's has devastated the world's economies. In the eyes of Governments, the god of capital growth will always come first before people's health.

Our response as anarchist communists should be to say "no going back to the old centralised top-down and unaccountable NHS, riddled through with private sector interests. No more under-funding of our health service and subjugating it to the needs of our capitalist economy. Develop a new understanding of public health, based on research and prevention and provided

through locally accessible and controlled facilities. Invest in essential workers and highlight the connections between public health, food production and climate change. No going back!"