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زبانهای اروپایی

NHS FightBack

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## UK: Starmer pledges Labour's support for NHS privatisation

Sir Kier Starmer has publicly committed the Labour Party to the further privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS).

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, the house organ of the ruling Conservative Party, Starmer declared in an op-ed that nothing was “off limits” when it came to the NHS. It should not be “treated as a shrine”, he said, repeating the formula employed earlier by his Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting.

**KEIR STARMER**

### The NHS is not an out-of-bounds shrine. It needs unsentimental reform

**Our health-care system is no longer the envy of the world. Labour will make the hard choices that are needed to resuscitate it**

When it comes to the health service, hard truths are currently in short supply. Well-meaning reverence for the ideals it represents and the care it can deliver has supplanted reality. And that reality is simple: if we don't get real about reform, the NHS will die.

After a decade of poor planning and platitudes from Tory governments, the situation for patients is intolerable and dangerous. Ambulances queue outside A&E with stroke victims left in the back; cancer patients wait to see specialists; people are stuck on hold at 8am every morning, desperate for a doctor's appointment. The idea that the service is still “the envy of the world” is plainly wrong.

I am not prepared to accept the Government's excuses that this is yet another thing out of their control. Covid made things worse, but the NHS waiting list had almost doubled in the nine years between the time Labour left office and the first lockdown. The report on the Prime Minister's desk into the waiting-list crisis, commissioned by the Department for Health, says: “We have essentially had 10 years of managed decline. This is not a Covid problem.” We owe it to the country to face the facts as they are,

– not a serious response but pure political grandstanding. But reform doesn't mean rearranging chairs with top-down impositions from Whitehall. And investment alone won't be enough. Instead, we need a ruthless focus on ensuring patients are treated better and sooner.

When I was Director of Public Prosecutions, I saw how public services focus far too much on treatment rather than prevention. Every serious case review that came across my desk, was the same story: lives that could have gone differently, let down by a lack of early intervention. The similarities with healthcare are clear. The opportunities to turn this around are huge.

GP services are the front door of the NHS and the key to that early intervention. But the demand for their care outstrips supply. They now carry

We need to be frank about what has gone wrong. Only a proper programme of reform and renewal will get us out of this crisis

huge patient lists. We've lost more

This would be a big change and it won't happen overnight. But I am a pragmatist, focused on what works for patients. As GPs retire and those contracts are handed back, I want to phase in a new system that sees GPs fairly rewarded within the NHS, working much more closely with other parts of the system. Not everyone will want to hear this – but it is the direction we need to go in.

We also need to be ruthless with the bureaucratic nonsense you encounter every day in the health service. Why can't people with persistent back problems self-refer to physio? Why if you notice bleeding do you have to get a GP appointment, simply to get the tests that you then do yourself at home?

Every patient will have their own experience of these mundane inconveniences and inefficiencies. Across the system and across the country each one adds up, resulting in a mind-boggling waste of time, energy and money, all of which could be better spent.

Some people recoil when I talk about change in the NHS. They think Labour's job is to merely defend public services. I have never believed that. Labour's job is to drive up standards, so that services don't need defending.

Screenshot of Sir Keir Starmer's op-ed in the Sunday Telegraph headlined, "The NHS is not an out-of-bounds shrine. It needs unsentimental reform" [Photo: Sunday Telegraph print edition, January 15, 2003]

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The country, Starmer insisted, must “face the facts as they are, not as we’d like them”. The NHS must be “reformed,” a phrase well understood in ruling circles to mean a root-and-branch restructuring for the benefit of the private sector and the wealthy. Reform “doesn’t mean rearranging chairs,” he added, and was not about spending more money since “investment alone won’t be enough.”

He had never believed it was Labour’s job to “merely defend public services,” but rather to “drive up standards,” more code for increasing productivity at the expense of the workforce. He was “hungry for new ways of working, for tackling ingrained thinking, for reform and modernisation.”

After criticising Tory Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for taking the “path of least resistance,” Starmer finishes by extolling his own fitness for doing “the hard yards and tell[ing] the hard truths.”

His statements in the *Telegraph* were followed by a series of television interviews where he expanded on Labour’s new pet subject of using private healthcare as an answer to the NHS crisis.

He told Sky News’ Sophy Ridge, “One of the issues that we’ve looked at is whether or not we’re using the private sector, effectively, a number of people do go as NHS patients to the private sector. Our research shows that that’s been underused, and we could do more of it.”

He told the BBC’s Laura Keunssberg that he would encourage people to bypass GPs and go straight to a private specialist via “self referrals”. The ignoramus was so caught up in his vision of eliminating “bureaucratic nonsense” that creates a “mind-boggling waste of time” that he even suggested, to universal derision, “If you’ve got internal bleeding and you just need a test, there ought to be a way that doesn’t involve going to see a GP.”

Starmer is positioning himself to the right of the Tories, as a firmer advocate of NHS privatisation. But it was his Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting who made this still clearer and spelled out that doing so will mean a direct conflict with the working class.

A devout Blairite, Streeting declared last December that the NHS had to “reform or die,” describing doctors and health workers as “vested interests” that he would not allow to “stand in the way of reforms.”

Just to be clear, he also told the *Telegraph*, “We are not going to have a something-for-nothing culture in the NHS with Labour... I’m not prepared to pour money into a black hole.”



Wes Streeting's interview in the Sunday Telegraph [Photo: screenshot of Sunday Telegraph print edition, December 11, 2022]

Starmer has already threatened his front bench MPs with disciplinary action if they attend picket lines. He has joined Streeting in supporting the Tories' claim that a pay rise matching inflation is "unaffordable." But this provides only a glimpse of Labour's hostility to the fundamental interests of health workers and those of the entire working class.

Labour, the party that founded the NHS in 1948, now nakedly advocates for private healthcare as the answer to the decades of sabotage and funding cuts that have brought it to the brink of collapse—and denounces NHS workers for opposing this.

On this and every major question—including support for austerity, opposing any fight to curb the pandemic, and support for war against Russia in Ukraine—Labour is making clear to the ruling class that it is ready to form a government that will act ruthlessly in the interests of big business and will take on the working class to do so.

Starmer denounces Sunak's government for treading the "path of least resistance" when it is preparing a massive state offensive against nurses, doctors, railworkers and educators involving new legislation to impose "minimum service levels" during strikes.

Yet, even now, the trade unions' SOS NHS campaign touts Labour as the saviour of the public health service. And the Trades Union Congress and union leaders urge workers to

accept Starmer's pledge to repeal the new anti-strike legislation when Labour takes office as good coin, insisting that a Labour government is the only alternative to the Tories.

Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union urges of Starmer, "come and stand with us... stand up for socialism, stand up for workers."

Meanwhile Polly Toynbee writes in the *Guardian*, "Don't panic when Starmer refers to NHS 'reform'. He is thwarting Tory moves to destroy it."

The few remaining Labour "lefts" grouped around former party leader Jeremy Corbyn strike an outraged pose at Starmer's pro-privatisation comments, but remain loyal advocates of his party of austerity, militarism and war.

The same holds true for pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, who complain that the trade union leaders should take their distance from Labour, that Corbyn should set up his own party and all concerned must "do more" to fight the Tories.

But political facts must be faced. If the NHS is to be defended, this cannot be under the leadership of a Labour and trade union bureaucracy that will always defend the profit system against any genuine challenge by the working class.

NHS FightBack, an initiative of the Socialist Equality Party, calls for the building of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace to take the fight to defend the NHS, along with the pay and conditions of those who work in it, out of the hands of the bureaucracy. We urge these committees to affiliate to the (IWA-RFC), so that their struggles can be unified with those of their brothers and sisters all over the world.

In its statement, "Defend lives and protect the National Health Service," NHS FightBack advocates the following demands:

**Halt the privatisation of the NHS**—Facilities allocated for private patients must be utilised to treat NHS patients. Privatised services must be taken back into the NHS.

**A substantial pay increase for all health/care workers**—The loss in real wages must be restored and a substantial rise awarded to provide a liveable wage.

**No victimisations**—No health worker should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work unless adequate protection is provided.

**Stop all hospital cuts**—All patients must have access to suitable treatment regardless of their age, frailty, disability, or visa status.

Implementing this requires a socialist programme that would see a massive injection of funds: paid for by taxing the super-rich and taking control of the major corporations, including Big Pharma, freeing medical research and drug production from the constraints

of private profit. All the resources of society must be placed in the hands of the working class and used for the benefit of all, not the enrichment of a few. Such a policy would see the NHS given the necessary billions of which it has been starved.

We urge all those who agree with this perspective to contact [NHS FightBack](#) and link up with our Facebook [page](#).

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