

Safeguarding the Future of the NHS

Workers' Weekly

Health Group

Volume 1, Issue 4, February 3, 2001



Workers' Weekly Health Group Interview with Angela Thompson

Question: Can you tell our readers why the strikers decided to stand a candidate in the general election

Answer: The reason to stand a candidate is that Ian Pearson (Labour MP) was elected on the basis that the National Health Service in Dudley would remain within the public domain. Since being elected in 1997 he has toed the Labour Party line. He has

turned his back on the community of Dudley. Our members are passionate and committed to keeping the health service in the public domain. We will stay out fighting as long as it takes to win. It is wrong that private companies can come in and make a profit out of our public services. We have seen what has happened in the railways, solely because they have put profit first before the health and safety of the people that use the service and those that work in it. We have seen what has happened there, so we can't see that it is going to be any different in the health

Demonstration of Dudley Health Workers to Mark 100th Day of Action

On the morning of Saturday, January 27, hundreds of people gathered at Dudley Leisure Centre for a demonstration in support of the Dudley hospital workers. The demonstration was called to mark the approaching 100th day of the start of the Dudley Hospital workers strike and other actions. This is a struggle waged by the health workers at the Dudley group of hospitals against the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme which aims to transfer 600 NHS workers to the private sector while losing 170 jobs and reducing 70 hospital beds.

Before the march started **Mark New**, UNISON Joint Branch Secretary for the Dudley Group of Hospitals, chaired a short rally addressing those assembled from steps in the car park. **Fiona Westwood**, a

UNISON regional officer, said that the strikers had done a great job in keeping the pressure up and that they had had a lot of support from the local people and the people in the wider community. She spoke about the donations and the material aid and asked everybody to make

"The movement should give rise to health worker politicians"

their presence felt and have a good demonstration around the town.

Martin Lynch for Dudley NUT then spoke. He said it was an important battle against privatisation and among other things he said that this was not just an industrial dispute in the traditional sense that you try and push

the gaffer for bit more money, longer holidays, or whatever. He said here we are clearly up against the government, who are standing behind the Trust and demanding that this agenda be pushed through, so inevitably it is a political battle. His view was that Dudley health workers have to win by forcing the government every inch of the way and then replacing them with something better eventually. He supported the decision of the strikers to stand an alternative socialist candidate in the election.

Roger Nettleship, UNISON Joint Branch Secretary of South Tyneside Health branch, was then invited to speak. He brought the solidarity of the health workers in South Tyneside. He said that health branches had stood **Continued Over**

service. The railways should be re-nationalised and the health service should remain in the public domain.

Question: Our readers would like to

know the kind of issues that the strikers intend to raise in this run up to the General Election.

Answer: Obviously we are totally against the PFI right through

all of our public services. There should be a minimum wage of £5 per hour, decent pensions for our pensioners and cut out racism. Those are the main issues.

Workers' Weekly Health Group

To Contact Send in letters or material please E-mail:

wwhg@rcpbml.org.uk

Write to: WWHG

John Buckle Books

170 Wandsworth Rd

London

SW8 2LA

Phone : 0207 627 0599

side by side opposing PFI at the UNISON health conference the previous year. Since that time the struggle of the Dudley hospital workers had broken out and today health workers in Dudley and workers elsewhere are rejecting not only PFI but the whole "social partnership" agenda. He highlighted the fact that the Dudley strikers were shifting their focus into the political arena and at the same time maintaining their struggle. He remarked that this had been done not by relying on the Labour Party but by considering standing their own candidate directly. This was a very important development and he emphasised that every health worker should get involved in the movement and become political and that the movement should give rise to health worker politicians.

Adrian Turner, Branch Secretary of UNISON branch in Wolverhampton, read out a message from his branch supporting the strike.

Lynne Hubbard representing health workers in Birmingham said that the job in hand was to keep spreading the message so that when we face privatisation cuts and injustice then we face it together.

Ron Dorman of the Campaign Against Euro-Federalism was invited to speak, and he said he was very pleased to show that the Campaign Against Euro-Federalism is in solidarity with Dudley strikers to save jobs and defend conditions within the NHS and to oppose both privatisation. He spoke about the campaigns and demonstrations recently to oppose privatisation in council housing, the struggle to defend elderly care, and the recent Vauxhall demonstration in Luton. He concluded by supporting the strikers and other movements of the people in standing their own candidates.

Dave Wyatt from Sandwell UNISON pointed out that they were continuing to organise support for the Dudley health workers. He said privatisation would not solve the serious problems that they are facing in their local authority and hospitals and gave his full support to the strike.

After the speeches were concluded the demonstration moved off through town led by the strikers. Leaflets were also distributed at the rally to the demonstrators and to the people in the town on the march who warmly supported the demonstration. **Workers' Weekly Health Group**

distributed a call on the occasion of the demonstration entitled "Develop the Movement to Safeguard the Future of the NHS". The call pointed out that the present actions of the workers show they are refusing to remain passive in the face of the most "sincere" justifications and increasingly refusing to allow their sentiments to be manipulated for the purpose of handing over their fate to others. The call concluded that it was necessary for all health workers to engage themselves in one way or another in the movement to safeguard the future of the NHS and that such a movement gives rise to worker politicians who fight to transform this movement into a powerful force for the renewal of society.

When the demonstration reached the Council House it turned onto the green below Dudley castle where hundreds gathered to listen to some final speeches of the day. **Steve Beardsmore** thanked the marchers for the fantastic turnout. He said that who would have believed in 1997 that by voting for a Labour government there would be 70 less hospital beds; that

hospital records would be turned over to a private company; that 600 health workers would be transferred to the private sector; that the Labour council would give away, not even sell, 29,000 council houses.

Then to loud cheers and applause the chair introduced **Angela Thompson**, UNISON Joint Branch Secretary for the Dudley Group of Hospitals, one of the strikers, and who was announced as the prospective parliamentary candidate for the strikers. She said: "As we near our 100th day of action our message from here to day should be to this Labour government. We are still here! We are still fighting! And we will continue to fight until we win!" After further applause and cheering from the crowd the speaker went on to say that on Monday the strikers had got a meeting with the local MPs. Originally it was to be a public meeting. But she said that they will only meet with the strikers. She said that the message she had from her MP was that he was scared and that he didn't want to meet the community of Dudley, the community that had elected him to the position that he was in.

She pointed out that he should be working on behalf this community and the message quite clear on Monday will be that we will stand a candidate against him. She said that by standing a candidate the Dudley health workers will be able to raise issues that we haven't been able to raise during this dispute such as on the loss of beds and on private companies making profit from illness. She concluded by saying that PFI should stand for Profit From Illness and that the Dudley strikers would make it quite clear to the MPs that "we are here to stay and we are not going to go away"!

Mark New then concluded the rally with some remarks on the state of the strike. Among other things he said that there was a national media blackout and that this was in the face of Trust provocations that kept threatening to sign the deal. He said that they were trying to break the strike and as Angela had said the strikers won't be broken. He said he was proud of the courage and determination of the strike and it was in stark contrast with the MPs. He concluded with the call: For the victory of all workers who are presently fighting privatisation and closures!