

# **An opportunity to fight back**

## **Build a national conference against cuts and health privatisation!**

There is growing anger at the cuts and co-location programme that represents government policy on health. There is a growing realisation that this policy will bring about the final collapse of the already poor health service and that membership of current health schemes will not provide the cover that will guarantee all the treatment we may need.

But now there is a growing opportunity to organise and do something about it – to build a mass campaign in defence of public health.

- The anger has been sparked by the creation of an unelected quango, the Health Service Executive, answerable to no-one and set up purely to make cuts and privatisation easier. It is guilty of a reckless and irresponsible destruction of the current service.
- There is a growing realisation that promises that co-location hospitals will treat everyone are simply fairy stories to silence the opposition and that their whole purpose is to build a bricks and mortar two-tier health service. Many people now realise that current health payments would have to increase by many times to even begin to get access to this private service.
- Opposition is growing. Not only are patient groups, nurses, doctors and other health workers protesting across the state - they are breaking the bounds of the purely local campaigns and raising the possibility of a global campaign asserting our right to an effective public health service.

## **An effective public health service**

It's easy to say what we mean by effective health service. We want a service that provides immediate and effective treatment when we are sick, along with effective support both in hospital and in the community when we are at home. This treatment should be free. There should be no allocation of health based on ability to pay.

How are we to achieve the goal of an effective public health service? Firstly we must stop co-location dead in its tracks. It will immediately set in stone a two tier health service. The US experience, spelt out in Michael Moore's film "Sicko", is that this leads to an immediate collapse in service and an explosion in costs – after all, the only way to force people to pay in a two-tier service is to make conditions in the lower tier unbearable! For the new private facilities to be profitable the cost of paying for them must go up.

We must also demand complete nationalisation of the health service and the abolition of private medicine. Anyone who knows anything about the present service knows that it is already a cash cow for private business, from the upper end of the swish clinics, charging all that the sick can bear, down to the local elderly homes which present inflated bills for negligent services. This part-private arrangement sucks money from the public purse while at the same time grabbing the lion's share of resources. Over time this parasitic arrangement drains the public service and contributes to its collapse. This is the point we have now reached. Huge cuts are now on the way as the HSE attempts to balance its budget.

The HSE must be abolished and democratic structures set up to control resources and determine priorities. These democratic structures must be under the control of health service workers and

representatives of patients groups and the local communities. If this is not done then ‘democratic control’ will mean exactly the same as its expression in the Dail and in the councils – corruption, backhanders, the rule of money, and the subversion of the service.

These structures must have the right to see exactly how the health service is being funded and have the right to veto any proposed closure of facilities. Those who work in the service are best placed to decide how to run it efficiently and effectively. This is real democracy and real public service.

## **A national campaign**

How can we turn this programme into reality?

The first step must be to build a national conference against cuts and health privatisation – particularly the new co-location hospitals. Steps along this road have been taken by some left groups, by health workers, by patients groups and local action groups. The call itself becomes a way of organising in every area and every sector.

The movement must be:

- **Political:** It must oppose the cosy consensus in the Dail which allows TDs and even health ministers! to posture in support of local services while supporting cuts and privatisation nationally. Political representatives who claim to support the campaign must publicly break with their parties if they do not oppose health privatisation. Their loyalty is with us or their parties – they cannot be allowed to talk out of both sides of their mouth at the same time.
- **Trade union leaders** who say they support the campaign must support the final publicly expressed wishes of Susie Long and break with social partnership. How can they be partners with the politicians who have brought the health service to this? Both SIPTU and ICTU have this opportunity right now when they meet to discuss the pay component of social partnership. They could immediately make the health service a deal-breaker and demand the resignation of Mary Harney, disbandment of the HSE and an end to co-location as evidence of the government’s good faith.
- **Campaigning:** organising everywhere, based on local groups and trade union branches, signing up support at every level and targeting health workers as the backbone of the movement. The SIPTU and ICTU conferences on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April respectively represent an immediate opportunity to demonstrate, organise and publicise our campaign. We should lobby these conferences and demand that SIPTU and ICTU take up our demands.
- **Interventionist and activist:** Able to physically prevent co-location and privatisation from becoming reality through the power of mass action and industrial action.

## **Build the conference**

Opposition to co-location and privatisation is everywhere, but so also is the feeling that we are weak and isolated. It is a long time since working people have won any victories. Even when we turn out in our tens of thousands - against the war and in defence of Irish Ferries workers, we are sold down the river and the bosses press ahead regardless. The only answer is to organise on our own behalf and not rely on leaders or organisations that have betrayed us. A national conference offers a way to do this. Sign up – and make sure you sign up others!