

Service Not For Sale!

By Eric Roberts, UNISON Branch Secretary, London Ambulance Service and UNISON NEC member



The Coalition is hiding behind the financial deficit and 'national interest' double-speak to launch the most destructive attack upon the National Health Service ever seen. These vicious cuts to services are political weapons of mass destruction. Public Sector workers in general and health workers in particular, along with the people that rely on them, are singled out to pay for a crisis they played no part in creating.

Ambulance workers and Ambulance Trusts are now in the sights of the Cuts Missile Launchers!

These carefully aimed Coalition Weapons of Mass Destruction have now hit the London Ambulance Service. Talk about Heat Seeking Missiles: we have been hit by Health Seeking Missiles.

Launched from Millionaires Row in Whitehall they have scored a direct hit. A successful public service targeted and the people of London used as collateral damage.

We knew it was coming. Unfortunately, Ambulance Services are not immune. We may be better placed than most health trusts, but we are certainly not better sheltered against the anti-public sector policies of this government.

We were told that the Health Service would be protected and ring-fenced.

We were told that 'front line' jobs would be safe.

We were told that patients would not be affected.

Lie! Lie! Lie!

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) published, and shared with staff, their five year Cost Improvement Programme (CIP) recently. This programme is in response to the withdrawing of a huge chunk of funding and it details how the Service will comply. As salary and wage bills are the biggest cost by far to the Service it is no surprise that the reduction of posts is the first to be hit on.

This is not right, not fair and not acceptable.

As it stands at the time of writing 890 posts are to be lost in the next five years within the LAS.

Eight hundred and ninety posts not filled on paper now, is 890 real job losses in the future. This is an 18% reduction of staff by 2015. By any standard that is shocking, severe and highly damaging.

£53 million is to be withdrawn from the

funding over the next five years. Funding which UNISON and our members played a big part in attracting.

Where is the ring-fencing? Where are the safe front line jobs? How can patients not be affected?

UNISON has been pro-active in condemning these cuts as a vicious attack, not only on all staff, but also on the people of London and the LAS.



London will be a less safe place to be ill or injured if all of these cuts go ahead, no matter how much we tinker around with alternative responses. Increases in demand – decreases in staff: it is not rocket science.

We can bet our bottom dollar that private ambulance companies are about to have a massive recruitment drive. £53 million of bait is dangling in front of their salivating faces. Who can blame them? When a shark circles a damaged ship in anticipation, it does so by instinct, not principle. The trick is not to damage the ship in the first place!

Everyone in our Service is employed in a post that helps us deliver patient care. We

rely on each other. The Coalition is misleading the public with their 'front line/backroom' division of staff. They don't fool us (and they won't fool the readers of Ambulance Today). Every member of staff played their part in taking the LAS from being described as the worst performing, to (ten years later), becoming the best performing ambulance service.

UNISON supports public services. We support the staff of the London Ambulance Service. We are proud of our involvement in the improvements to our Service so we are not going to give them up lightly.

If 'weapons of mass destruction' is a military term I use to describe the method being used by the Coalition to blow apart public services, there is another military term to describe the strategy behind it: **Shock and awe!**

The term 'Shock and Awe' is best remembered as the military doctrine and strategy used by the United States of America in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In fact the strategy's full moniker is: **Shock and Awe - Achieving Rapid Dominance!**

It has been a military tactic, one way or another, going back hundreds of years. It was used in the Second World War with the German Blitzkrieg and when the United States dropped Atom bombs on Japan.

By the way, 'Shock and Awe' now has a commercial wing with companies lodging Trade Mark applications to use the name for a variety of products ranging from golf equipment to condoms! ... don't ask!

The principle of 'Shock and Awe' is also used by Governments in civil society. The Coalition's attacks on the welfare state and public services is a form of 'Shock and Awe', minus the bombs, the jackboots and the Vera Lynn songs granted, but it is used for the same purpose and with the same devastating affect.

Massive cuts, brought in quickly, all at once, over wide areas, constantly, relentlessly, coldly. 'Shock and Awe' wrapped up in a 'we're all in it together, no alternative' flag.

It is meant to get us down; it is meant to blunt our resistance; it is meant to break our will; it is meant to confuse us; it is meant to leave us feeling helpless: it is meant to turn us into rabbits in headlights.

Of course the Coalition does not see it this way, or should I say they do not describe it this way. They describe it as 'liberating the NHS' and 'setting the markets free' and let's not forget 'the big society' or 'smaller State'.

The second stage of 'Shock and Awe' is privatisation. There is an ideological and semantic battle being waged which the ordinary people of this Country, led by their trade union, have to win.

The supporters of the Coalition's policy will vehemently disagree with me of course, claiming that the NHS is safe in their hands, and what they are doing is improving and protecting it. Well, surprise surprise, the cat's out of the bag!

The Coalition's mask has slipped further again regarding the future of the National Health Service if they get their way.

A senior adviser to David Cameron has said that the Health Service could be improved by charging patients and that it (the NHS) will be transformed into a 'state insurance provider, not a state deliverer' of care.

Mark Britnell (part of the Prime Minister's 'kitchen cabinet') told a conference of executives from the private sector that future reforms would show 'no mercy' to the NHS and offer a 'big opportunity' to the for-profit sector.

As this conference took place in New York it is all the more clear that the privatisation of health is the strategy of this government, no matter how many crocodile tears they shed in support of public healthcare.

Mr Britnell, who was a former director of commissioning for the NHS, is now Global Head of Healthcare at the accountancy giant KPMG. They are a global network of firms providing Audit, Tax and Advisory Services. The combined revenue of firms belonging to this network was \$20.63 billion in September 2010. Industries covered by KPMG include Healthcare and Pharmaceuticals.

I wonder what firms, from what network, will bid for any NHS Services that the Coalition 'liberates'? Answers on a postcard please... Mark Britnell wrote in a recent

Health Service Journal article along similar lines as his speech to the New York conference. He calls for a more sophisticated discussion regarding public v private, but he populates his side of the debate with financial and private sector gobbledegook that he knows most people and families worried about their health will find confusing.

Boiled down though I think his argument is: 'because healthcare is free - people use it. If this carries on, how will the private sector (who he represents) make their billions on the back of the sick?'

Full scale privatisation within the wider Health Service will lead to full scale privatisation within the Ambulance Service. The debate about public v private is important.

Who will provide ambulance cover for the people of Britain in the future? Publicly funded ambulance trusts at the centre of a truly national health service, there for the benefit of the people, or private ambulance companies, there for the benefit of shareholders?

The answer is in our hands.

I made a speech on behalf of UNISON London Region to the Annual General Meeting of SERTUC (South East Region Trade Union Congress) at Congress House, London recently, outlining the impact of the cuts on the LAS and our staff.

I repeated that the Coalition's statements

that the NHS was ring-fenced are a lie. I repeated that the statement that 'front line' posts would be safe was another lie.

This has to be repeated over and over because the general public are being hoodwinked.

I repeated that the London Ambulance Service was a successful public service and that the people of London, and our staff, had benefited greatly from a strong partnership with UNISON within the organisation, but the continuous success and partnership was now under huge threat.

More Ambulance Services are preparing to publish their own Cost Improvement Programme (CIP). It will be interesting to see the national picture.

Once we get these then we can really understand the true impact on ambulance services and staff of this massive ideologically motivated cost cutting exercise.

35,000 jobs are at risk within the National Health Service at this very moment with more to follow.

In the Chinese community 2011 is the year of the Rabbit. In Britain 2011 is the year of the Cull!

Stand by your union and protect your Service through these difficult times. We are stronger together.

**Eric Roberts, Branch Secretary
London Ambulance UNISON**

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