

Sam Semoff

Sam Semoff died peacefully on 11 Jan in the Royal Liverpool Hospital after a long illness. Hundreds of us in Liverpool and elsewhere knew him as a friend and comrade. He was warm, intense, committed, and ready to engage with anyone he met. He lived in Liverpool 8 (Toxteth) as an American in exile, an anti-racist, lifelong opponent of Zionism and supporter of the Palestinian people. We knew each other best through his work in defence of the NHS. As a founder member of Keep Our NHS Public Merseyside, Sam continued chairing meetings even while carrying an oxygen bottle and undergoing dialysis.

No-one – porter, domestic, nurse, medic or Consultant - got within a few feet of Sam in hospital without being asked their attitude to the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), or the latest government plans to undermine the NHS. During the Junior Doctors strike, he persuaded staff to let him appear at the Atrium window above the demonstration in the ambulance forecourt. Sam phoned through to a mobile pressed to the megafone and addressed the strikers.

Good morning everybody. I am a patient on the Cardiology ward here in the Royal. I've been in here two weeks and I can tell you the care has been absolutely great.

Jeremy Hunt is a liar – he says we need a 24/7 service, well we have 24/7 service. I have been in here two weekends and a doctor was always available, so were support services.

Hunt is also a hypocrite – he talks about patient safety, yet he wants to remove requirements that limit junior doctors working unsafe hours, putting patients lives at risk.

The doctors went into medicine to help people, their main concern is their patients' needs above all else... Hunt knows this and takes advantage of it, he thinks he can push them to the limit and they will not do anything.

But they have said enough is enough, they know the risks to their patients in going along with Hunt's proposals are greater than doing nothing. I wish a lot more health workers would reach that point.

The Government is determined to decimate the NHS and turn it into a market based health care system like in America. They have eroded the principles of universality, of a comprehensive integrated service that is publicly accountable and they are now working to undermine publicly provided, as the NHS is broken up into bits and turned over to the private sector where the overriding aim is profit.

When they get around to removing the principle of a service free at the point of delivery based on need, it will be too late.

I hope to see you out here next week and the week after.

Sam's deep knowledge of the communities in Liverpool 8 came to the fore when NHS England handed over the management of a dozen Liverpool surgeries to the private firm SSP. Sam was a patient at Princes Park Health Centre, which had pioneered community treatment for the whole person in the 1980s. So SSP wasn't just an affront to his politics. It was personal. Sam hit back with 10,000 leaflets in Arabic, English and Somali, delivered door to door and to every shop on Lodge Lane. He had been Sec. of Granby Ward Labour Party, and ran this like an election campaign.

It culminated in a public meeting of around 130, almost all of whom were current or former patients at Princes Park, furious at how the service had collapsed. It was held in three languages with interpreters and a PA system, allowing Somali women who sat with their friends in a side room to address the entire gathering. The meeting led directly to a survey, a report, and the intervention of the CQC which eventually kicked SSP out of Liverpool, though some NHS staff were victimised in the process.

Sam led the fight against PFI funding for the new Royal Hospital. He was vilified in the Echo, which ran the scurrilous headline “Bogoff Semoff”, claiming that an American was trying to deny healthcare to the people of Liverpool. No-one ever apologised for that, even when the newspaper finally woke up to the PFI catastrophes at Whiston Hospital and around the country.

Sam brought a Judicial Review which forced the Royal to re-run their consultation as they had not even mentioned that the new hospital would be funded by PFI. Every Liverpool Labour MP backed the scheme, as did Cllr Nick Small and Joe Anderson, at that time leader of the Labour group within the Council. The Royal PFI was signed off by Andy Burnham as Health Secretary on the eve of the 2010 General Election. Sam lodged a second Judicial Review, challenging the claim that the PFI would deliver Value for Money.

On 17 Nov 2010 BBC Radio Merseyside put Sam up against Joe Anderson, who declared "I know it doesn't provide Value for Money now or in the future, but it's the only game in town". That admission ricocheted all the way up to a Treasury Select Committee Inquiry into PFI. But the JR was derailed when Cllr Small approached the Legal Assistance Board and got them to pull the funding for Sam's challenge.

Sam had already left the Labour Party over Iraq, but rejoined more recently in support of Jeremy Corbyn. He joined Unite, and was active in the Community Branch of the union. He knew construction workers blacklisted by Carillion, but didn't quite live to see the company collapse with the new Royal half-built. A few days earlier, Sam commented “Workers united, is the only defence they have.”

When the news of his death came through, a demo at the Health and Wellbeing Board turned into a tribute to Sam.

We all miss him. Let's honour him by continuing the fight.