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PUT AN END TO THIS!

We want
a
National
Health
Service!

A COMMUNIST PARTY PAMPHLET



The Government must adopt the National Health Commission Scheme

IT APPEARS TO US THAT A NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE HAS BECOME INEVITABLE UNLESS THE WHOLE TREND OF PUBLIC AND PROFESSIONAL OPINION IN REGARD TO HEALTH NEEDS IS REVERSED. ACCORDINGLY, WE RECOMMEND THAT A NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE BE ESTABLISHED."

In these words, the National Health Services Commission reported to the Government after months of hard work and careful study of the health needs of our country and its peoples.

What made the Commission come to this conclusion?

It found that the nation's health services were "NOT organised on a national basis—they are disjointed and haphazard, provincial and parochial. These services are NOT in conformity with the modern conception of health—they are mainly directed to the cure of ill-health and not to the promotion and safeguarding of health. They are NOT available to all sections of the people of the Union. They are distributed mainly among the wealthier sections who, on account of their economic potentialities, should need them least, and are poorly supplied to the under-privileged sections who need them most . . . the position in many parts of the country was portrayed in the striking phrase used in evidence at Graaff-Reinet: 'Hulle word siek, hulle gaan dood, en hulle word maar net begrawe.'"

PIE-CRUST PROMISES

When the Commission was appointed, Government leaders were full of virtue. It was in the days when the

whole world was going to be changed. Reform was in the air. South Africa was not going back to the bad old days. The Government was going to introduce great social changes—no unemployment, health for everyone, work for all, houses for everybody. Great emphasis was laid on how health was going to be safeguarded. All that was necessary was that a Commission be appointed and, when the Commission reported, the Government would “act promptly”—and so on and so on.

Those were the days before Mr. Hofmeyr began making speeches about the poverty of the country, before the Government press was publishing articles telling us that we could not afford the luxuries of social security and health, that we had to work hard because we were all so poor on account of the war (except the men who have made fortunes out of it).

Great days those! Before and after the general elections of 1943, we were told that now we had a strong Government which could solve the problems of peace and war.

So with a great flourish of trumpets a National Health Services Commission was appointed. And then, a few weeks before its report was published, the Prime Minister told us that “the country was not ready for its recommendations,” that “the constitutional issues raised made things difficult.” Dead as a door-nail was the national health service even before the scheme had seen the light of day!

There was a great outcry: Even the M'bongo Government press swallowed hard and made protesting noises. Kill the national health scheme by all means, but do it quietly and respectably!

One of the men who had sat on the Commission, Dr. Luke, was so outraged that in his presidential address to the Cape Western branch of the South African Medical Association he said that the Government had betrayed the public, the medical profession, the country, and that it had forfeited all claim to support from intelligent people.

These are strong words. But let us see if he is justified in his criticism.

THE DISEASE

The Commission found that “the picture of the nation's ill-health cannot but be viewed with concern. The health

of the people is far below what it should and could be. On balance it is probably deteriorating at least as far as four-fifths of the population are concerned."

"FIRST AND FOREMOST AMONG THE CAUSES OF ILL-HEALTH ARE THE ECONOMIC POVERTY AND THE SOCIAL BACKWARDNESS OF THE GREATER PART OF THE UNION'S POPULATION. VAST NUMBERS OF THE PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY DO NOT EARN ENOUGH TO PURCHASE THE MINIMUM OF FOOD, SHELTER AND CLOTHING TO MAINTAIN THEMSELVES IN HEALTH."

"The most striking feature in regard to personal health services—those in which trained medical, dental and nursing personnel minister to the personal needs of the individual in health and sickness—is their maldistribution. For they are not distributed according to NEEDS, but according to the MEANS of those who require them."

"With regard to non-European sections of the population, hospital accommodation is entirely inadequate. Native hospital needs go largely unsatisfied."

The Commission found that in the Union about 15% of the total amount of money spent on health is devoted to preventing disease and about 85% to curing it. "In the Soviet Union," the Report says, "the one country in the world where health services are planned nationally in accordance with the modern conception of health, 60% is spent on preventing disease and 40% on curative treatment."

On top of all this the Commission discovered that such health services as exist are unco-ordinated. Different authorities deal with different health problems. The Provincial Councils are responsible for hospitals. The Central Government is responsible for mental diseases, leprosy and the district surgeoncies. It also deals with the prevention of the entry of infectious disease. Town Councils have the job of safeguarding water supplies, food and housing and, in addition, are responsible for infectious disease hospitals. All this means confusion and overlapping. Sometimes urgent measures cannot be undertaken because different authorities quarrel among themselves as to whose responsibility is involved.

Well, now, this is the picture of the state of the nation's health—a picture which very briefly summarises the find-

ings of the Commission. And after most careful study of the whole question, backed up by a tour through the country to see the problem at first-hand, the Commission reported in the words with which this leaflet is introduced. "IT APPEARS TO US THAT A NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE HAS BECOME INEVITABLE . . . ACCORDINGLY, WE RECOMMEND THAT A NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE BE ESTABLISHED."

THE CURE

What does a national health service mean? What are the broad general principles laid down by the Commission?

The Commission says that the National Health Service must be under the control of a Minister of State responsible to Parliament. In order to provide a safeguard against bureaucracy, in other words, against the dangers of a machine-like system which is run like a civil service department, the Commission recommends the following:—

- (a) Technical committees to control and advise upon technical aspects of health service at every level in their administration.
- (b) The setting up of a special Commission to deal with appointments, promotions and conditions of service of all those employed in the service.
- (c) Democratic control of housing, sanitation, etc., through local authorities like town councils, etc.
- (d) Advisory committees on which provincial councils, local councils, voluntary organisations and the general public will be represented are to collaborate in administering the personal health services, i.e. medical, dental, hospital and nursing services.

ALTHOUGH THERE IS TO BE CENTRAL CONTROL OF THE SERVICE, ADMINISTRATION IS TO BE REGIONALISED. In this way the Commission hopes to get more democratic control.

HEALTH CENTRES

All cases of illness which do not require treatment in a hospital are to be based upon Health Centres serving the population within a clearly defined area. Doctors will be supplied with technical equipment for diagnosis such as X-rays and laboratories. Families living in this area will have free choice of a doctor from among the staff at the

Centre. These doctors will have at their disposal the entire specialist and hospital resources of the National Health Service.

This is a very short account of the scheme outlined by the Commission. The Report should be read by every serious citizen, because its authors have rendered a great service to their country.

COMMUNIST CRITICISM

We of the Communist Party do not agree with all the details of the Report. We submitted a memorandum to the Commission and we believe that democratic control of the national service could be improved by bringing the people more closely into its administration. The Commission has this to say on the subject:

"The difficulty is that the vast majority of 'the people' are not only unenfranchised and therefore unaccustomed to exercising any control over public services, but are also superstition-ridden in their outlook on problems of health and disease."

This may be true, but it is of course an argument for ending this state of affairs as soon as possible.

There are one or two serious criticisms which the Communist Party has to make. In recommending rates of pay for nurses, the Commission advises that Coloured nurses should get 80%, and African nurses 75%, of the rate for Europeans. This is quite inexcusable and completely out of tune with the progressive nature of the Report. For instance, it says: "We wish to state emphatically that we are opposed to any selection of entrants to the medical profession which will discriminate between one race and another. We strongly recommend that no distinction should be made on grounds of race, colour, creed or sex in the selection of medical and dental students. In the medical profession no discrimination based upon sex or race should be permitted in regard to salaries."

Why, then, discriminate in the nursing profession?

Another criticism rests on the financing of the National Health Service. The Commission suggests that everyone should contribute directly to the Health Fund, however small the contribution. But, as Senator Henderson says in a minority note, it is quite unreasonable to ask the very poor to pay a direct tax.

IN SPITE OF THESE CRITICISMS, THE COMMUNIST PARTY WELCOMES THE REPORT. ITS RECOMMENDATIONS, IF PUT INTO EFFECT, WOULD MARK AN IMMENSE STEP FORWARD.

GOVERNMENT EXCUSES

We feel convinced that the people generally would welcome the scheme. The excuses put forward by Mr. Harry Lawrence and Mr. Waterson for the Prime Minister's rejection of it do not hold water. What the Government is trying to do is to pretend that by playing about with the scheme in a small way here and there it is slowly building up to the whole structure. But, as Dr. Luke points out, this is not "national," not "co-ordinated" and "not in harmony with the modern conception of health."

It should be clear to everyone that the Government, as it is constituted at present, will not put the scheme into effect unless great pressure is brought against it.

HOW TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM

We need a Government which will tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy along with the problem of health. We need a Government which can plan boldly for progress, which is not afraid of the future of our country. We have to develop our country's resources, to save our soil, to expand agriculture and good farming, to speed industrialisation. We need to develop our people as well as our country. We must educate all citizens. We must train them to do skilled work and to bring out the best that is in them.

In this way we can tackle the first and foremost health problem—the poverty of our people. And in this way we can go forward to building a happy and healthy South Africa.

To do this we must try to get all those who believe this is worth fighting for to join forces without regard to their political party labels. The workers of all races in our country stand to gain most in this. They must try to work together, to concentrate on the things which bind them together instead of the things which divide them. This is the objective of the Communist Party and for this it will fight and work.

Ross

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