Speech to UNISON’s Health Conference (25/04/2016)

Thank you Wendy.

It’s a pleasure to be here today and to be addressing my first Unison Health Care Conference as Labour’s Shadow Secretary of State for Health.

Colleagues, I know we are meeting in tough times.

If anyone has borne the brunt of this Tory government, then it is those of you who work in our health and care services.

An unnecessary and unwanted top-down reorganisation.

Broken promises over pay – attacks on terms and conditions.

And the longest and deepest funding squeeze in the history of the NHS.

But in these difficult times, it is more important than ever that we remind ourselves of what inspires and unifies us.

The theme of this conference is ‘Proud to be in Unison’.

And there’s a lot to be proud of.

Proud of the fact that Unison stands up for nearly half a million people who keep our NHS running - the nurses, health care assistants, midwives, health visitors, paramedics, technicians and many, many more who do so much to make our health service one to be proud of.

And we should be proud too of the fact that Unison fights for that simple idea that every worker matters as much as their boss.

Your values are my values, and we share our pride in this great Union and the Labour movement of which it is a part.

Your people are what makes your union, our party and our NHS what it is – no matter what the Tory Government throws at us.

And that's why I want to talk to you today about one of my key priorities for our health and social care system – the workforce.

Within days of being appointed by Jeremy to this job, I realised that the health and care workforce is under huge pressure.

Many of you tell me how you feel you are constantly being asked to do more for less.

How you often worry about your ability to provide the high quality care you want to, because you are just being stretched so thinly.

And how you fear that Government changes to our health service are leading to a more fragmented system, where patients are the ones who fall through the gaps.
I share your concerns and I know that if we want our NHS to be there for our children, we must invest in the current generation of health and care staff and the next generation too.

This is a priority for me not only because doing right by staff is in the Labour Party’s DNA, but because it is the right thing to do for patients as well.

Let me start with the big news at the moment – and something that is emblematic of this Government’s approach to the workforce – the junior doctors’ dispute.

Jeremy Hunt’s handling of these negotiations has been nothing short of a disgrace. He has undermined staff morale, destroyed trust and alienated a generation of junior doctors.

This weekend, I brokered a proposal with members of other parties which could have resolved this dispute.

And what was Jeremy Hunt’s response?

He said it was “opportunism”.

I say to him – even at this late stage – do the right thing for patients, staff and the NHS and choose talks, over strikes.

If Jeremy Hunt spent a bit more time on the frontline and a bit less time in his bunker in Whitehall then we might not have got into this mess.

But the truth is we have a Health Secretary who can barely show his face in a hospital because he’d be chased out of the door.

How can this possibly be a healthy state of affairs?

One of the first things I did after taking on this job was to spend a morning shadowing a junior doctor at Lewisham Hospital.

It was one of the best decisions I took.

The junior doctor was working a gruelling 11-hour night shift.

I left the hospital feeling blown away by the skills, knowledge, humanity and professionalism that I saw.

And I left wondering how it could possibly be right that our doctors were being pushed to breaking point by a Health Secretary who seems to think that running the NHS is a cynical game of brinkmanship?

But it wasn’t just the junior doctor who left a lasting impression on me.

I got chatting to a healthcare assistant that morning - a woman who had been to my advice surgery just a few months before.

When I asked her about her job, she told me she would take home just £13,000 a year for working weeks of long, demanding shifts.
And it reminded me why the junior doctors’ dispute is so important.

It’s because we know that if Jeremy Hunt gets his way with junior doctors, he will be tempted to come for everyone else next.

For Unison – I know that fight has already started – and I’m proud of the way this union has stood up to George Osborne and his plans to scrap NHS bursaries.

George Osborne wants student nurses – and other allied health professionals - to pay for the privilege of training in the NHS.

I say that is wrong.

It is SO wrong on SO many levels, it is hard to know where to start.

At a time when we are having to import nurses from abroad and hospitals are spending millions on hiring expensive agency staff, why would we risk making the staff shortages even worse by putting off the next generation of students?

Why would we choose to limit the nursing profession to those best able to pay as opposed to those best placed to care?

And when it comes down to it, why should a student nurse have to pay to do a night shift?

The truth is these proposals are ill-conceived and not backed up by a shred of evidence.

A few months ago I went to Unison’s offices in London and had the privilege of meeting four deeply impressive young women who were studying to become nurses—Danielle, Charli, Marina and Sophia.

All women in their 20s, whose lives had not followed the middle class path of GCSEs, A-levels and then straight to university.

Their stories are those of student nurses up and down the country.

Danielle, who left school after her GCSEs, but went back to do her A-levels. She got a job as a healthcare assistant and then decided she wanted to go into nursing.

Marina, who had a baby when she was 16 and by all accounts, had a pretty tough life. But she is now on a mission: she wants to be a mental health nurse.

When Marina says she thinks the best people to care for others are those who have experienced hardships themselves, I think she has a point.

And when all 4 of them say that the fear of debt is greater for those who have children, who may have already built up other debts from studying or just as result of trying to get by, I think they are right.

I also know how the fear of debt can be greater amongst for those from a working-class background.

I know what discussions take place in homes across the country about the pluses and minuses of going away to university and racking up debts when you could just start earning.
I know because, unlike so many of today's Tory cabinet, I experienced those discussions myself.

And do you know what?

I **know** this out of touch Tory Government simply doesn't understand the real lives of real people in our country.

So let me make this guarantee to you today – Labour will oppose these ill-thought out plans every step of the way.

And over the coming weeks and months Labour will stand side by side with Unison to save NHS bursaries from Tory cuts.

But alongside making sure we look after the next generation of staff, we need to do so much more to look after the current generation too.

I am proud that it is the Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn, who appointed the first ever shadow cabinet member for mental health.

And I can think of no-one better for that job than Luciana Berger.

If we don’t get serious about mental health now then society could be paying the price for many years to come.

I say we have a duty of care for those who do so much to care for us.

I say NHS staff, and staff working in the care sector, do some of the most demanding jobs in our country.

We need to get serious about their care.

It is shocking that more than 1 in 3 NHS staff say they have suffered from work-related stress over the last 12 months.

Amongst some professions the figures are even higher, with almost half of midwives saying this is a problem for them.

That’s not good for staff, and it’s certainly not good for patients.

I believe improving the health and wellbeing of NHS staff goes hand in hand with improving patient care.

And colleagues, that is why the mental and physical well-being of staff will be at the top of my agenda.

Because staff who feel valued, provide valuable services.

No-one working in the health service should suffer ill-health as a result of their work.

This should be true of any workplace but it must especially apply to the NHS - our proudest institution and the biggest employer in our country.
For as long I am in this job, I guarantee I will do all I can to improve working conditions, to ensure staff are respected and supported, and that you are enabled to deliver the world-class care that everyone wants to see.

Finally, I want to say a few words about listening to staff.

I've long thought that politics would have a much better reputation if us politicians did more listening and less talking.

So I know that I wouldn't be doing my job properly if I sit in Westminster behind my desk all day.

And I know won't find the solutions to the problems the NHS is facing there.

I will find them in the hospitals, care homes and GP surgeries across the country.

I will find them by speaking to people like you – people on the frontline who know your jobs better than anyone.

People who will know what works and what doesn't.

And people who know what is really happening day in day out in our NHS.

Maybe if this Tory government had listened to the people who work in our NHS we'd have had no top-down reorganisation, no cuts to nurse training places, and no half-baked plans to close A&E services, like at my local hospital in Lewisham.

And I'm pretty sure the Government wouldn't be forcing the NHS to make £22 billion worth of efficiency savings by 2020 – because I know that there is no-one who works in the NHS who believes these efficiencies can be delivered without cutting staff or cutting services.

So let me finish by saying this – I will always listen to staff.

I know I have a big responsibility in my job but I need your help too.

We need to work together to defeat this Tory Government in 2020 – and we need to show the public what ten years of Tory rule does to our NHS.

I won't get everything right, and you may not agree with everything I say, but as long as I do this job, you have my guarantee that I will fight for the NHS with everything I've got.

Thank you for listening.