

British Medical Association winds down action against pension cuts

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On Thursday June 24, a national strike of general practitioners (GPs), medical officers and consultants took place in Britain—the first for 37 years—showing the discontent that exists over the slashing of pension benefits by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government.

Doctors are opposed to having to pay more towards their pensions and working more years for fewer benefits.

GPs reported to work on the day of industrial action as usual, but refused to attend to non-urgent cases—leading to the cancellation of thousands of surgery and hospital appointments and operations across the country.

Determined to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on working people, the coalition has targeted the National Health Service pension scheme. To have a full pension, members of the scheme will have to work until the age of 68 and any future increases to the state pension age automatically incorporated without further consultation. According to the British Medical Association (BMA), doctors will be contributing 14 percent of their salaries by 2014.

The BMA estimates that the doctors currently at the start of their careers will in many cases have to pay over £200,000 in additional lifetime pension contributions. There will be a switch from a final salary scheme to a career average revalued earnings (CARE) scheme, which means a lower pension. The government has also reduced pension increases by using the lower Consumer Price Index rather than the usual Retail Price Index.

A BMA ballot held in May showed that of 17,561 GPs who voted, 63 percent agreed with strike action and of 18,721 consultants who voted, 73 percent were in favour. Of the 3,476 specialist doctors and associated staff who took part, 77 percent backed a strike and the figure was a huge 82 percent of the 12,060 junior doctors who voted.

After the strike, the government claimed that only around one in 10 patients in England were affected and three-quarters of GP surgeries were operating at normal or near normal service. The media, which normally turns a blind eye to the massive health budget cuts and the privatisation taking place in the NHS, also downplayed the number of doctors taking part. Newspapers published provocative comments regurgitating government claims against “well paid” doctors and shed crocodile tears for people who had to wait another three months for minor operations due to the strike. The venom spewed out was in marked contrast to the treatment of the bank executives and corporate heads that enriched their wealth massively during the crisis years.

Health Secretary Andrew Lansley tried to justify the government’s attacks by saying that doctors would still have a more generous pension than other public sector and private sector workers. He went on to hypocritically speak about the effects of the strike declaring, “It is extremely regrettable if any patients have suffered unnecessarily”—this from a member of a government that is inflicting untold suffering on millions with its austerity measures.

The government is forcing through parliament the

Health and Social Care Bill, which is aimed at dismantling and privatising the remaining parts of the health service in defiance of warnings by health professionals about the suffering it will cause.

Waiting times for surgeries have increased enormously during the last couple of years due to cuts of £20 billion to the £120 billion health budget. Frontline jobs have been cut and the overall care of patients curtailed. Clinical services and staffing levels are severely affected, with potentially disastrous consequences for both patients and workers.

According to the British Social Attitudes Survey last year, overall satisfaction with the way the NHS across Britain was being run fell by an unprecedented 12 percentage points from 70 percent in 2010 to 58 percent in 2011. Satisfaction with individual NHS services also fell. For GPs the fall was by 4 percentage points and for accident and emergency services by 7 points.

Doctors should not be fooled by the rhetoric of the trade union leaders that they will continue a genuine struggle against the government's attacks on pensions. The BMA and other public sector unions agreed wide ranging changes to pension schemes with the Labour government minister John Hutton in 2008, including an increase in the retirement age for new NHS staff from 60 to 65. They fully supported a cap on employer contributions so that employees will be responsible for maintaining the scheme in the long term. Doctors were forced to increase the amount of salary they paid into the pension scheme from 6 percent to 8.5 percent.

At last week's BMA annual conference, its head, Hamish Meldrum, declared, "Though we demonstrated a powerful and united voice on Thursday, while also delivering on our essential commitment to maintain patient safety, no-one should be triumphalist, no-one should be rushing to repeat it or escalate it."

A motion was approved that called for another day of action involving hospital doctors refusing to treat non-emergency cases. It was unclear if GP surgeries would close. The motion means next to nothing, as the day being bandied about is Christmas Day when few, if any, non-emergency cases are scheduled and GP

surgeries are normally closed.

In addition, the motion is non-binding on the BMA as only the full council has the authority to call industrial action. At a special meeting last week, the Council declared that any decision over further action would be deferred, partially in order to allow Mark Porter, who replaces Meldrum, to hold discussions with Lansley.

Across the board, the trade unions have sabotaged any real struggle against the assault on public sector pensions. In November last year, more than two million public sector workers took action against the government's plans. Immediately afterwards, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), together with the majority of unions, worked to divide public sector workers into separate "scheme-specific" talks, behind which they have effectively signed up to the changes demanded by the employers. Four trade unions that had still not been able to reach agreement with the government then called off a planned national strike set for March 28 this year.

When it eventually went ahead on May 10, only two unions took any action.

Some 400,000 went on strike according to the unions, while the government put the number at just 150,000. The poor support for marches and rallies—only 500 turned up to the centrepiece demonstration in London—reflected the degree to which the unions have been successful in sabotaging any struggle by public sector workers. No national strike action has been sanctioned by any trade union in the future.



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