British Medical Association calls off UK junior doctors strikes

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On Monday evening, the British Medical Association (BMA) called off yesterday's planned 24-hour strike of 40,000 trainee junior doctors in England, to resume negotiations with the Conservative government in the ongoing contract dispute.

The BMA also called off two other walkouts scheduled for December 8 and 16.

The move outraged junior doctors, who were set to picket 149 National Health Service sites throughout England. Many denounced the BMA on its web site and social media.

Tory Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt provoked the dispute by attempting to impose an inferior and punitive contract on the doctors. The strike was to begin at 8 a.m. Tuesday. So late in the day was the sell-out engineered that many hospitals had already cancelled more than 4,000 scheduled treatments and operations.

The deal came after five days of talks between the BMA, the government and NHS employers. The BMA entered talks at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) last week, as it stepped up its efforts to sell out the doctors.

From information that has emerged, there is nothing to suggest that the government has backed down in the slightest and has only agreed, while talks continue, not to impose the proposed contract. The *Guardian* reported that despite the BMA's cave-in, "[M]inisters are still threatening to force it through if a final settlement with the BMA is not reached."

On Monday evening the BMA only said, "Following conciliatory talks with NHS Employers and the Department of Health, we have agreed to suspend industrial action in England. … The Government has also agreed not to proceed unilaterally with the introduction of a new contract."

It added, "This decision is in the best interests of patients, doctors and the NHS. It is disappointing that it has taken until the eleventh hour for the health secretary to drop his threat of imposition."

Acas commented, "In reaching this agreement to return to negotiations the BMA acknowledge the wish of NHS Employers and the Department of Health to agree and implement a new contract without undue delay."

The government is seeking to extend weekend coverage in the NHS, but on a no-overall-cost basis. Under the current junior doctors' contract, weekend and out-of-hours work is paid at a premium. Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt wants to increase the standard time when premium rates do not apply from 60 hours to 90 hours.

The BMA estimates junior doctors could lose up to 30 percent of their pay. Many have to rely on their current out-of-hours premium pay to manage.

The new contract would also abolish the banding system, whereby junior doctors receive annual pay increments based on their length of service. According to the BMA, it would remove "vital safeguards which discourage employers from making junior doctors work dangerously long hours, and in doing so protect both patient and doctor safety."

Almost 100 percent of doctors voted to strike in a 76 percent ballot turnout, with just 564 voting against. The action would have been the first by trainee doctors within the NHS since 1975, when they struck to demand payment for work done outside the standard 40-hour working week.

The BMA's betrayal allows the government further time, by promising no strikes until January 13, to come up with a repackaged deal in order to carry out effectively the same attacks on doctors' employment

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conditions and pay.

According to the *Guardian*, the "basis for fresh negotiations is the government's offer from early November." This is an offer already rejected by the doctors. Relying on growing support in the population, earlier this month doctors rejected an attempt by the BMA and Hunt to head off the dispute. In the run-up to the launch of the ballot, Hunt offered an 11 percent pay increase and proposed that rather than all-day Saturday being classed as base pay hours, it would only apply to hours between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.—hours outside this range being paid at premium rate.

In recent weeks, doctors held a series of meetings and rallies throughout the UK, with around 20,000 participating in a march in London in October. The doctors won overwhelming support, with polls showing up to 95 percent of the public in favour of the struggle they were waging.

On the BMA's Facebook page, a doctor said, "We voted for a strike. Who are you to then decide we are not striking without consulting us. Shocking."

He added that Hunt will now "demand twice as much as he wants and you will meet him halfway."

A former BMA member said, "I quit your organisation in 2012 over the pensions debacle. You didn't have the stomach for a fight then and it appears you have lost it again now." He added, "You had a mandate, just shy of 75% of all junior doctors on your books voted for full industrial action. We had public support. So many people out with the profession voiced support for us and many celebrities also supported us. So what has Hunt done, TEMPORARILY withdrawn the threat of imposition and now he is making out like we were the stumbling blocks."

The BMA's is only the latest in a catalogue of sell-outs carried out by the unions. They have collaborated to the hilt as successive Labour and Tory governments have moved to impose the £1 trillion cost of the 2008 bailout of the banks onto the backs of working people.

In 2011, the BMA refused, along with other trade unions to organise a general offensive of all public sector workers, to defeat the Conservative-led government's attack on pensions. In 2012, after holding a token strike over the pension cuts, the unions closed down any further struggle.

A strike that commanded enormous popular support and would have gravely weakened the government had it spread throughout the NHS and beyond, was called off just 24 hours before Parliament is due to vote on going to war in Syria. Nothing is being allowed to jeopardise the plans of the pro-austerity, warmongering government.

In its statement on the strike, "Victory to the junior doctors! Defend the NHS!", NHS Fightback, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, warned, "No faith should be placed in the trade unions, which have strangled one struggle after another. They have played the key role in enabling the government to push its measures through by restricting opposition to job losses, wage cuts and hospital closures to local or regional campaigns, organising token protests, petitions and writing letters to MPs."

The only way forward is for "all doctors and health workers to build action committees, independent from the unions, and based on a socialist strategy to fight against the attacks on pay, terms and conditions as the only way to defend public health care."

For further information visit: www.nhsfightback.org

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