

Junior doctors strike throughout England

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of junior doctors in England took part in a 24 hour stoppage Tuesday against the government's unilateral decision to impose new contracts.

The strike came after four months of a dispute in which the government has insisted its proposed changes go through and was the first such work stoppage since the 1970s. The contracts, even with an 11 percent basic pay rise, will result in a de facto pay cut of up to 30 percent.

A Conservative government on the fast track to privatising National Health Services (NHS) and imposing £22 billion in cuts on top of the previous £20 billion in cuts over the last five years cynically claims that their aim is to have a proper seven day health service. Prime Minister David Cameron is now shedding crocodile tears about patient suffering, due to cancellations of more than 4,000 elective surgery operations and other appointments as a result of the strike. Right wing media outlets have joined him in denouncing the junior doctors' strike in seeking to overcome the massive support the strike is receiving.

The strike meant that one in 10 operations on the day did not go ahead, as 10,000 junior doctors out of 26,000 has agreed to go in to work in order to minimise patient suffering. NHS England and the government's propaganda attempted to portray this as opposition to the strike citing 38 percent non-participation. However, a better measure of the strength of feeling were the junior doctors who defied Sandwell and West Birmingham hospitals order to return to work after declaring a level four incident.

Attempts are underway to prevent a second strike. A fresh round of talks was announced by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) just three hours after the first strike ended, beginning today at 10 a.m. and continuing Friday. The aim is to prevent a 48-hour strike planned to begin on January 26—with emergency care provided and an all-out strike on February 10.

British Medical Association (BMA) representatives, speaking anonymously to the *Guardian*, were conciliatory with one stating that "there is a deal to be done" and another indicating concessions that might be made to the government.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt wants to reclassify what is regarded as a junior doctor's normal working hours on basic pay. Those now paid extra for working after 7 p.m. on a weekday and at the weekend will have normal time extended to 10 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays until 7 p.m. The *Guardian* reported, "One member of the BMA's junior doctors committee said they might agree to the 10 p.m. extension on weekdays in return for Saturdays remaining as they are."

Junior doctors held around 100 well attended picket lines across

the country. Reporters from the Socialist Equality Party and its initiative, NHS Fightback, spoke to striking doctors and others.

Barry Shirwin had come to support junior doctors at the Royal Bournemouth Hospital (RBH):

"I had open heart surgery several years ago. There is a real danger that the Conservative government intends to privatise the NHS. Believe me I will fight tooth and nail to keep the NHS.

"Between November 2011 and February 2014 in excess of 4,000 people died unnecessarily because government assessors deemed them to be fit to work. These assessors are not medically qualified people and did it on point scoring. You can't sit back and let these things happen. Homeless numbers have gone up. More people are dying with cuts to benefits. It just can't go on without being opposed. A doctor can work 90 hours Monday to Friday! At the end of the day you have to draw the line somewhere."

Joe Nussmann is a junior doctor at RBH:

"These contracts are not safe for patients. The government is proposing to increase the number of hours doctors are supposed to work. What we have now is already a 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year health service. What the government is trying to do is spread the staff over seven days and increase the numbers working on weekends. You can do it in only two ways. You can either increase the number of people working, or, what the government wants, increase the number of hours staff work. That's not safe for patients and not fair for doctors.

"There is misconception that doctors earn £150,000 a year. Our starting salary is £22,000 year plus about 50 percent banding. So a 30 percent cut is substantial. I am not saying we are poor, but considering we've been training for six years, some of us have been working 20 years and are still junior doctors.

"What we are seeing is just the beginning; cost-cutting at junior doctor level and bursaries of nurses have been scrapped. The contracts of the consultants will be next. People become exhausted and make mistakes when they work over 60-70 hours a week."

Rob Willington is an acute medicine registrar at RBH:

"I'm worried if the government succeed in imposing these contracts it will drive away people from the profession and the NHS.

"We are for a good quality seven-day service. The government's plan for seven-day services seem to be focussed more around providing routine care at the weekends such as routine out-patients appointments. These can be provided in the weekends, but that's inherently very expensive.

"Re-defining anti-social hours as normal hours makes working conditions worse for doctors. It is likely that a higher proportion of doctors will be forced to leave either the profession or the country.

It would be harder to recruit into specialties. At the end it would be worse for patients. In many places I have worked, there are many unfilled posts. If you look around it has come to the breaking point.”

Irwin Cardoso is a geriatric medicine registrar at RBH:

“Doctors are not against a better seven-day service. The government is trying to impose contracts that are not good for patients and unfair for doctors. They will lead to mistakes from doctors and failures throughout NHS. If the NHS does not function effectively, then it will be up for sales for private companies. I suspect that is where the government is heading. These plans should be defeated.”

Emma is a doctor in Poole General Hospital:

“I am really proud to work for the NHS. No matter when you walk through the door whether you are male or female, black, white, Muslim, Christian or atheist we treat you equally to the best of our ability. I want to keep the NHS like that and want to preserve that quality.”

Damian Mayo is a junior doctor at Poole General Hospital:

“The new junior doctors’ contract is the first part of the shakeup of working conditions of the NHS workforce. Consultants’ contracts are currently being negotiated. Student nurses bursaries are going to be withdrawn.

“Over the last five there has been years of below inflation pay rises for NHS workers. There has been a pay cut. They now want us to do more unsocial hours for less money. It’s a set number of doctors and a set number of hours. They want us to cover more weekends, more nights, more bank holidays. They want to increase a third of a working year for no extra money. That’s not possible.

Andy Biggin was a picket at Leeds General Infirmary (LGI):

“The strike is the last option. We’ve attended discussions, and discussions through the Advisory, Conciliation and Advisory Service (ACAS) and that’s broken down. So that’s the only option we have left.

Ross Farrar was also a picket at LGI:

“We’re quietly confident the turnout will grow. People are on call and doing other productive things today. A colleague is teaching some undergraduate medics—his way of showing his disagreement with the way things are going. The response of other professions is widely supportive—mostly Consultants and those higher up are supporting our strike. I’ve met hardly anyone who is against it.”

Shazhad supported the junior doctors at Bradford Royal Infirmary (BRI):

“If we didn’t spend money on Trident nuclear weapons and other projects, there would be money for the NHS. The £1.8 billion spent on nuclear weapons could be spent on the NHS and still have resources in hand.”

Alex is a junior doctor at BRI:

“Because the government was not listening to our serious complaints about patient safety, which comes out of the new contract, we decided to strike. The BMA are negotiating with a government that does not understand how the health care systems work, how we need to care for patients, how you have to keep a workforce together and keep safe staffing and keep doctors fit for work.

“Jeremy Hunt tries to be a business man but this is health care. A lot of us think it is a stage process towards privatisation.”

John and Catherine work at Charring Cross Hospital:

“With the new measures, Saturday will be counted as a normal working week day, lengthening the working week from 5 to 6 days. Bonuses for weekend work are going to be nullified.

“At Charring Cross, weekend work will occur at the rate of 1 in 2. Night work spans 3 to 4 nights. It occurs once every four weeks currently. But with the new measure, night work will increase in frequency and length.

“The disciplinary procedures against junior doctors will be severely tightened, as one mistake due to overwork and long working hours and fatigue will be used by management to implement harsher disciplinary measures against the whole medical profession and make them toe the line.

“The trade unions have a record of being inadequate at defending the NHS and the working conditions of health workers. This strike was pushed through by by-passing the unions and using the BMA.”

Prandadeep is a junior doctor at Chertsey and Ashford hospitals:

“Prime Minister David Cameron claims that most people die in hospitals over the weekend due to a lack of doctors working. In fact admissions to hospitals over the weekend are decided based on the severity of the condition of patients.

“A patient admitted over the weekend is likely already in a severe condition. Because of cuts over many years and not enough personnel, death rates are relatively high over weekends. Research time is going out of the window and only front line work is emphasised.”



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