

UK: Junior doctors demonstrate in run-up to Wednesday strike

Thomas Scripps and Ajanta Silva
8 February 2016

On Saturday, thousands of junior doctors and their supporters held a rally and march in London in preparation for a 24-hour strike Wednesday.

The demonstration was supported by hospital workers, student nurses and a cross section of working people. Many junior doctors travelled from other parts of the country to take part.

The demonstration revealed yet again the determination of junior doctors to fight the government's unilateral decision to impose inferior contracts on them and the strong support they have among the wider population. Opposed to mobilising such support as part of a joint offensive by health workers, the British Medical Association (BMA) used the event to bolster their ongoing negotiations with Conservative government Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, as a means to dissipate growing anger.

Concealing the central political questions junior doctors face, the BMA promoted the bankrupt slogan of "Hunt must go", as if a new Tory secretary of health would do anything different. They promoted the illusion that if junior doctors show that the implementation of contracts would create a massive exodus from the profession, the government will back down.

The reality is that the track record of this government and its predecessor, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, demonstrates that the ruling elite are hell-bent on completing the privatisation of the National Health Service (NHS), with the defeat of the junior doctors central to their aims.

Johann Malawana, the BMA junior doctors' committee chair who is leading the negotiations with the government, spent less than 90 seconds on the stage at the rally. He addressed none of the political issues junior doctors face, even as the government prepares to arbitrarily implement the new contracts. Malawana stated last week that the BMA had made good progress on a

number of issues in talks with the government's chief negotiator, Sir David Dalton.

To appease those protesting, the BMA wheeled out actress Vanessa Redgrave and designer (Dame) Vivienne Westwood, who made a few token criticisms of the government. Neither of them, nor the BMA, had a word to say about the attacks made on the NHS by the 1997-2010 Labour government, which are being accelerated by the Tories.

Socialist Equality Party members distributed hundreds of copies of the NHS Fightback statement, "Junior doctors to take second strike" and spoke to number of those attending the event.

Frahan, a junior doctor said, "I am here because I want to fight the imposition of unfair and unsafe contracts. The government are giving false information to the wider public. It is a massive 20 to 30 percent pay cut. All the government data should be reanalysed by the media."

"Their ultimate aim is to privatise the NHS and dismantle the services," he said. "This not only a question of junior doctors' contracts, it is a question of patient care and safety. We are here to defend both our contracts and the NHS against the attacks by the government. Next the nurses', consultants' and other staffs' contracts will be under fire. They are supporting us now and we will stand with them together.

"The NHS never ever closes and we have already got a seven-day service. We know it can be improved but the government's intention is completely the opposite."

Sima, a junior doctor in London, said, "We are here to stand up for the NHS. Junior doctors are part of the front of line staff of the NHS. The proposed contracts will create a situation where we cannot look after our patients safely. They are trying to impose these contracts without listening to 54,000 junior doctors.

"At the end of the day, unsocial hour payments are part of the problem. We are pointing out lots of safety issues.

Unsocial hours cannot be ignored. Saturdays and Sundays are the weekend for everybody. We are already doing all the emergency care over the weekend. We are always prepared to be there for our patients. We don't have a choice. We are happy to be there. What we are talking about here is extra weekends with no additional pay. They are trying to spread the elective services throughout seven days. We have them over five days and we cannot stretch it any further without additional staff and money.

“We've got arguably the best health service in the world. Anyone can get care whenever they need it. I do not understand all the politics behind these attacks, but we have been driven here by the attacks on our contracts. This is not going to be our last stand by any means.”

Michael is an anaesthetic nurse who works in London. He said, “I am supporting the junior doctors because the contracts government are trying to impose are not safe for patients and doctors. It is the thin end of the wedge for how all NHS staff will be treated. The NHS is an amazing institution respected worldwide.

“I am here representing doctors, nurses, radiographers and other supporting staff. It is disgraceful if the government imposes these contracts. I think we will see a massive resignation of doctors and eventually nurses will come to the point that they will take industrial actions. I am a member of both the Royal College of Nursing and Unite. General support from the unions for the junior doctors' struggle has been shockingly poor. RCN is a pretty toothless organisation. Everyone needs to support the junior doctors.”

John, a trainee in neurology, said, “These contracts will have a major impact on me in terms of loss of earnings and will have a significant impact on patient safety. Government claims that the junior doctors are against an improved seven-day service are not true. There has been a lot of conflation of the issue of a seven-day NHS with junior doctors' pay and conditions. Actually junior doctors support seven-day NHS services, but in order to have safety and fairness we should be paid for the work we do.”

Dr. Arohi Shaa from West Middlesex Hospital said, “This shows how strongly we feel about our contracts. Government proposed contracts are unsafe and unfair for patients, doctors and NHS in general. We did not want to be demonstrating or striking. We have been forced into it. Imposition is not the way. You can't bully us to accept new contracts. We have to continue to show our strength and to keep united.”

Peter, a medical negligence lawyer, said, “I have spent

20 years fighting for patients against doctors. But I have become so outraged by the way the government has bullied and intimidated the junior doctors. After 20 years fighting on the other side of the courtroom, I decided to cross over and fight with the junior doctors.

“We've seen so much spin and media manipulation from the government. The government repeatedly said that the BMA was not willing to negotiate with them. But what the government wants to do is impose and enforce unsafe and unfair contracts on junior doctors. I am a lawyer and I can tell you that this is not a negotiation. This is bullying. That why I am walking down this road with junior doctors, standing shoulder to shoulder with them. Every member of the public should walk with them today.

“What happened to junior doctors today is a part of wider attacks on the NHS. Government wants to run the NHS into the ground and say it is broken and the only way we can fix it is to privatise it. It is quite obvious.”

Jim, a London taxi driver, said, “I had wonderful support when I was in hospital. We have had this health service since after the war. My father was in the Labour movement. He said that these things were fought for by the Labour movement. It wasn't given to us.

“We must defend them and should not let the capitalist class take them away. After attacking the doctors, they will start picking off the other groups. Government gains confidence if they manage to defeat a group. So we must stand together and defeat the government and their attempts to cut the services and doctors' pay.”

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