

UK junior doctors speak out during latest strike

Our reporters
8 April 2016

This week, junior doctors in England held their fourth strike, walking out Wednesday for 48 hours. They are opposing the imposition of a new inferior contract by Conservative health secretary Jeremy Hunt.

The new contract, due to come into effect August 1, will mean a reduction in pay for out-of-hours work and erode safeguards against working long hours.

The strike led to the cancellation of around 5,000 operations. Socialist Equality Party members spoke to junior doctors on picket lines around the country. They distributed to strikers copies of the statement from NHS FightBack, “UK Junior doctors dispute at a crossroads” and showed strikers a prominent Conservative blog calling for junior doctors to be defeated as coal miners were during the yearlong miners’ strike. Junior doctors had to be “given their 1984,” it stated.

At London’s Charing Cross Hospital, Henry, a junior doctor, expressed his frustration at the limiting of the dispute by the British Medical Association (BMA): “The strike actions organised, led and controlled by the BMA have gone nowhere so far. The government does not care and is not impressed. I am for a general strike of all public sector workers and professions.”

Henry thought the “trade unions are doing nothing towards rolling out such an action.”

Amy spoke of how just a few MPs, including Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, attended a recent parliamentary debate on the NHS [National Health Service] Reinstatement Bill, which called for the health service to remain in public ownership: “It was ridiculous. It was a short session in Parliament, and there were only 17 MPs. They did not care. They were not serious about rolling back the 2012 Health Care Act.”

The act ended the compulsory responsibility of the health secretary to “provide” health care nationally.

At Poole General Hospital in Dorset, Hugh, a junior

doctor, said, “There are twice as many people here than the last strike. Actually, momentum is gathering, especially with the announcement of the escalation of strike action to fully withdraw from all care in the next planned strike. Public opinion remains with us, as they know that we are doing this for them and for the benefit of the NHS.

“Initially among doctors, a lot more people were saying that this was a nonpolitical issue. It is intrinsically political. I have seen other comparisons of our strike to the 1984 miners strike. The Tory government is determined to shrink the public sector at any cost.

“We can see that this government is dismantling the NHS. The government is willing to bail out the financial services, but not to fund our public services.”

Asked his opinion of the BMA, Hugh said, “Traditionally the BMA did not want to see itself as a trade union and do not necessarily want this to be a wider workers’ dispute. ... I think a lot of workers in the public sector are struggling as we are and we need to work together.

“If the unions want to fight, they should be throwing all their weight behind this struggle. It is the other health care workers who are going to be the government’s next target. Why are they silent? They should be doing everything they can. These trade unions should be representing their members and should be standing for the doctors in the strongest way possible. Uniting behind this dispute is essential. This is an issue of the future of the NHS, and we should treat it as such.”

As well as the BMA, the Labour Party was also criticised by junior doctors on other picket lines.

Anna, on the Salford Royal Hospital picket line in Greater Manchester, is doing a foundation course after

five years in medical school. She said, “Privatisation has been going on for a long time. Governments have been dismantling the NHS secretly, so they can say it is unsustainable and failing. Most of the European countries have semi-private health care, and that is what Labour and the Tories want. The last Labour government supported the Private Finance Initiative.

“The government is targeting doctors first, and next in line will be consultants and nurses. If Labour got voted in, it would be just the same for us. You’d think Corbyn would be really standing up for us, but he has never come out in support.”

Ahmed is in the second year of his Foundation course and said, “Even if we win this dispute, I believe the privatisation of the NHS will go ahead, and I don’t think a Labour government will stop it. On most issues, the differences between Labour and Tory are very small. We have to turn out to the public. No one else will save the NHS.”

Jayne, in the second year of a four-year training post in anaesthesia, said she had already seen the NHS FightBack statement on Facebook: “The Labour Party is just as guilty as the Tories of attacking the NHS. As you said in one of your leaflets, didn’t Labour sign off to PPI and they supported privatisation? They don’t support our dispute publicly, so by proxy they support the Tories.

“I don’t think pressure on the government will work. They are going to impose this contract. It would be much better to unite doctors, nurses, all staff to fight the attacks. The government are attacking us now and will be coming for everyone else next. I don’t know if the BMA have handled this dispute as well as they could have.”

On the picket line at Leeds General Infirmary, West Yorkshire, John said, “I think the government is looking to privatise the NHS. It is their long-term aim. Jeremy Hunt does see this as his miners strike and is looking to break the BMA.”

On the picket line at Huddersfield Royal Infirmary in West Yorkshire, Angela, a trainee anaesthetist, noted the proposal made in the Conservative Home blog to bring in volunteers working in the NHS along the lines of the Territorial Army. She replied, “One of the key features of the NHS is to have people doing the same job day in day out and being on the shop floor every day. Having people coming and going as physicians’

assistants would not be beneficial.

“What worries health care professionals is that it seems to be an indirect attack on the NHS itself. I am very proud of the NHS as an institution—a national health service, free at the point of access, open to all. If you start to break that up, it would be against the very essence of what the NHS is.

“If you need a heart transplant or a liver transplant, you can get one for free. If you have a heart attack and go into accident and emergency, you don’t have to worry about having to pay for your treatment. That is something you take for granted until you go to another system where you have to pay.”

For further information visit: www.nhsfightback.org



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact