

Public support for UK junior doctors strike grows as government insists they must be “defeated”

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Yesterday's all-out strike of around 45,000 junior doctors in England was met with furious denunciations from the Conservative government and a hostile media. The strike continues today, from 8am to 5pm. These are the first stoppages in the nearly 70-year history of the National Health Service (NHS) to be held without emergency care being provided.

The strike was well supported, with picket lines set up at hospitals throughout England. Demonstrations were held in a number of towns and cities. When Tuesday's strike finished at 5pm, thousands of doctors and their supporters marched through London from St Thomas' Hospital to the Department of Health, where a rally took place. Among those marching with the doctors were delegations of teachers.

According to NHS England, 78 percent of doctors did not show up for work. At the Barts Health Trust, which runs Barts, the Royal London, Newham General and Whipps Cross hospitals, 88.4 percent supported the strike. Just one junior doctor worked at the Manchester Royal Infirmary.

The doctors are fighting the imposition of an inferior contract attacking their pay, terms and conditions. Following their failure to agree the terms of a new contract with the British Medical Association (BMA), in February the government moved to impose the contract by August.

Ahead of the strike Monday, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt gave a speech during a parliamentary debate declaring, “Today, we reaffirm that no trade union has the right to veto a manifesto promise voted for by the British people.”

Hunt was referring to the Tories election pledge to create a “seven-day National Health Service”. What he

didn't state was that junior doctors already work seven days a week, as do many NHS workers. The Tories want to force doctors to work more weekends, with no extra resources being put in to finance a seven-day workweek.

Junior doctors not providing emergency back-up was “a crossing of the Rubicon—crossing a line in a way that has not happened before,” said Hunt.

Other MPs demanded that the strike be defeated at all costs. Tory Philip Davies said, “No government should ever give in to this kind of industrial action,” while Andrew Bridgen said Hunt had to “stick to his guns and not to give in to the unreasonable demands of the BMA.”

He called for doctors to be barred from taking industrial action. Stating that “Police or the armed services, who are essential workers” are “barred by law from taking strike action,” he demanded that Hunt “review the situation with regard to A&E medics.”

The *Guardian* gave a flavour of the discussions underway in ruling circles. It noted, “Some ministers are privately describing the bust-up with doctors in training as ‘a miners’ moment—a dispute we cannot lose.’ This is in a reference to Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s struggle with the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984-85. It added, “That phrase is being heard inside government. Ministers see the junior doctors’ dispute in that light. They say that there’s no going back,’ said a second Whitehall senior source familiar with the ministers’ thinking.”

The government is preparing to do whatever is necessary to ensure the strike is crushed, under conditions of growing opposition to its plans to end publicly funded health care. This week 32,000

paramedics and ambulance staff, members of three trade unions, are to be consulted on a ballot for strikes over pay and conditions. Citing the possible strike by ambulance workers, the *Financial Times* warned Tuesday that any “compromises on the government’s part would risk giving a green light to others who wish to secure more generous pay settlements.”

The barrage of propaganda against the doctors was led by right-wing newspapers including *The Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, and the *Daily Telegraph*. *The Sun*’s editorial Tuesday described the strike as “shameful” and a threat to “patient safety,” with the doctors led by “hard-Left union agitators spreading lies on social media.”

The *Telegraph* editorialised, “Junior doctors cannot dictate health policy,” resurrecting the spectre of the bringing down of the Conservative Ted Heath government in 1974 by the miners.

It noted that over the following decade, “successive governments struggled with trade unions whose ability to disrupt public services and strategic industries gave them clout to rival that of elected politicians. It was answered, decisively and to the benefit of the whole country, by Margaret Thatcher.”

Hunt’s policies had to be imposed as “he speaks for a government elected with a clear majority on a manifesto commitment to move the NHS to a full seven-day service,” the *Telegraph* continued.

This is a flat-out lie. The Tories do not have a mandate to impose their devastating attacks on public health care, including another £22 billion in “efficiency savings”. Only 24 percent of those eligible to vote supported Hunt’s party in the 2015 general election, while the vast majority of working people back the junior doctors’ defence of the NHS. Despite the hysterical scaremongering about the impact of strikes held without emergency cover, an Ipsos MORI opinion poll for the BBC published Tuesday showed that 57 percent of voters back all-out strikes—a rise from 44 percent when respondents were asked the same question in January.

The defeat of the 1984-85 year-long miners’ strike by the Thatcher government required not only the full force of the state, but the active collusion of the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and its affiliated unions in isolating the dispute and the refusal of the NUM led by Arthur Scargill to challenge this. The

same dangers are raised today.

The BMA, despite the government’s unprecedented intervention in trying to defeat the doctors, insists that it is not a “political” strike. Meanwhile, all the health unions worked unsuccessfully with the Labour Party over the weekend to engineer a return to work and the introduction of the inferior contract via a pilot scheme. Despite union leaders occasionally offering their verbal support and “solidarity”, they have yet to organise a single strike in support. In reality, the union bureaucracy and the Labour Party fear the doctors’ strike becoming the spearhead of a political and industrial offensive by workers and young people against austerity and privatisation just as much as the government does.

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