

UK doctors struggle escalates with announcement of 20 days of strikes

Robert Stevens
3 September 2016

On Thursday, the British Medical Association announced an additional 15 days of strike action by junior doctors to follow five days announced Wednesday.

A first strike is set for September 12-16, with additional five-day strikes on October 5, 6, 7, 10 and 11, November 14-18 and December 5-9. The BMA said the strikes will involve a "full withdrawal of labour" by doctors—meaning they will be held without the provision of any emergency cover.

This scale of industrial action is without precedent in modern times. It speaks to the anger and determination among 50,000 doctors to oppose the Conservative government's imposition of a new contract that undermines their conditions and threatens the well-being and safety of patients.

The new contract, which the government intends to impose next month, includes the reduction of unsocial payments for weekend working, with Saturday and Sunday between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. reclassified as normal working days and nightshift rates reduced, along with the elimination of automatic pay progression.

While the government claims it wants to make NHS services fully available, seven days a week, this is only a pretext for the destruction of living standards and working conditions for doctors and other NHS staff, who will be required to work nights and weekends without overtime pay.

In July, junior doctors defied the government and BMA by throwing out the agreement the two had reached on a revised contract. This followed five rounds of nationwide strikes that started in January and culminated, in April, in the first ever all-out strike in the nearly 70-year history of the NHS.

A ballot on the agreement recorded a 58 percent

majority against acceptance, with over two thirds of those eligible to vote taking part—approximately 37,000 doctors. This led to the resignation of Dr. Johann Malawana, chair of the BMA's junior doctors committee (JDC), who had recommended the inferior deal.

It is reported that the BMA council voted by 16 to 12 or an even narrower 16 to 14 in support of further industrial action. Dr. Mark Porter, chair of the BMA council, said the BMA only authorised the first set of strikes after "long and difficult debates."

Even as it announced the new strike dates, the BMA stressed its willingness to call them off if the government returned to negotiations. Malawana's interim replacement, Dr. Ellen McCourt, stated, "We have a simple ask of the government: stop the imposition. If it agrees to do this, junior doctors will call off industrial action."

The strike announcement met with a vitriolic response from the government and media. Prime Minister Theresa May denounced the strikes and backed health secretary Jeremy Hunt, who has advocated the NHS's privatisation.

The Tory-supporting *Daily Telegraph* editorialised, "The BMA's frightening militancy is reckless", adding, "We urge the junior doctors to test their consciences—acknowledge the danger to patient safety—and cross the picket line."

A leader column in the *Daily Mail*, "How dare the doctors barter lives for cash," continued the onslaught: "For make no mistake. If these stoppages go ahead, causing the cancellation of some 125,000 operations and 1 million outpatient appointments, it will be only a matter of time before the body-count begins."

It added, "Why don't they come straight out with it and say: 'Give us more money—or else we'll let people

suffer and die?”

The strikes are also opposed by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, which brings together doctors' professional bodies. This group stated Thursday, “Five days of strike action, particularly at such short notice, will cause real problems for patients, the service and the profession.”

To blame doctors for endangering patient safety is a vicious slander. The government's provocative efforts to impose an inferior contract on junior doctors are integral to its plans to further privatise the NHS.

Last week it was revealed that under new Sustainability and Transformation Plans, the Tories plan to close down a raft of hospitals and health units, and “re-provide” health units deemed “not clinically and financially sustainable” to the private sector. This is part of a drive to cut £22 billion in “efficiency savings” from the NHS budget in the current parliament, and is on top of the £15 billion in cuts made between 2010 and 2015.

Earlier this year 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’.”

An article on the leading ConservativeHome blog called for the junior doctors to be “given their 1984.” This is in a reference to Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's struggle with the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984-85, in which the entire force of the state was hurled against striking miners, and whose defeat led to the loss of more than 100,000 jobs. The defeat of the miners was pivotal to the unrelenting assault on the jobs and conditions of the working class over the subsequent three decades.

In taking a stand in defence of publicly funded, free, well-resourced health care, the junior doctors have the support of the majority of the population, despite the massive barrage of right-wing propaganda denouncing their struggle. An online poll conducted Friday by ITV of a large dataset of over 42,000 people recorded 85 percent of people in favour of their action. Another poll taken Friday by the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sky News* found that 57 percent supported the strikes.

In the face of the onslaught against the junior doctors, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has yet to speak in their defence, no doubt in deference to the right-wing

putsch attempt against him by a majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party. There was just one solitary tweet from the Labour leader praising a *Guardian* article written by Labour's Shadow Health Secretary Diane Abbott.

The tweet said only “Government must engage collaboratively and constructively with junior doctors.” Abbott's article likewise did not make any call for support of the strikes. Blaming the Conservative government for having potentially caused the “very first five-day strike in the NHS,” Abbott lamented, “All of this is avoidable. The BMA junior doctors committee is willing to enter talks about the contract. The government could approach the aim of creating a seven-day NHS in a collaborative way.”

Such statements can only blind junior doctors and the working class overall as to the real intention of the ruling elite and the need to launch a political struggle against the government and its apologists in the Labour Party based on a socialist perspective.

The junior doctors' dispute confirms the analysis of the Socialist Equality Party and its NHS Fightback initiative that the defence of health care as a social right means breaking the domination of the financial and corporate elite over economic and political life.

The strike must be taken out of the hands of the BMA bureaucracy, with doctors forming committees independent of the unions and turning to staff throughout the NHS and the entire working class and young people for support. The Socialist Equality Party and the NHS Fightback campaign pledge their support in building this necessary solidarity in defence of the junior doctors and the defence of free and universal health care.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact