

British Medical Association calls off junior doctors strikes

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The Conservative government has again been emboldened in its offensive against the working class as a result of the latest craven capitulation of the British Medical Association (BMA).

The BMA only announced 20 days of strikes by 50,000 junior doctors last Thursday, after stating that the government was intent on imposing a new contract from next month. But on Monday, the BMA called off the first five days of strikes—set to begin on September 12.

The new contract, which the government is imposing from next month before any action will now take place, 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. In the name of bringing in a seven-day health service, with no additional funding on offer, it sets a precedent for a massive assault on all health workers.

The BMA was forced to call further strikes after junior doctors rejected a sell-out agreement reached between the union and the government in July. This was meant by the union bureaucracy to bring an end to 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 National Health Service (NHS).

The rejection forced the resignation of Junior Doctors Committee (JDC) chair Dr. Johann Malawana, who was replaced by Dr. Ellen McCourt.

The strike announcement prompted a vicious government and media campaign against the junior doctors. In unison, they declared that the upcoming strikes, to be held without emergency cover, were endangering the public with those on strike prepared to let patients “suffer and die”—as one newspaper declared.

Instead of opposing such lies, McCourt used them to justify the BMA’s latest retreat.

“Thousands of you have been in touch, your level of

anger over the Secretary of State’s imposed contract remains high, but at the same time you want to keep your patients safe during industrial action,” she stated. “Patient safety remains doctors’ primary concern. For the first time in this dispute NHS England have told us that a service under such pressure cannot cope with the notice period for industrial action given. ... Our hospitals are chronically under staffed. Our NHS is desperately underfunded. We have to listen to our colleagues when they tell us that they need more time to keep patients safe.”

The initiative has once again been handed to a hated government, which has refused to budge an inch. In addition, as it has at every juncture of this dispute, the BMA offered to call off the remaining strikes. McCourt declared, “The BMA has repeatedly said that it will call off further action if the Secretary of State stops his imposition of the contract, listen to the concerns of junior doctors, and works with us to negotiate a contract, based upon fresh agreed principles, that has the confidence of junior doctors.”

Junior doctors must confront the stark truth.

Despite fighting against the government’s plans for more than two years, they are facing an impasse that threatens defeat.

The central reason for this has been not only the pernicious role of the BMA, under Malawana and now under McCourt, but the isolation of the junior doctors’ struggle by the trade unions and, above all, by the Labour Party.

Junior doctors correctly see their fight as one in defence of the NHS and against plans to run down, break up and privatise the service. Indeed, just prior to the BMA vote for further strike action it was revealed that NHS chiefs are planning to close hospitals and slash many services in England—in response to the £30 billion funding deficit projected by the year 2020-21—beginning as early as next

month.

The NHS is routinely cited in the holiday speeches of the labour and trade union bureaucracy as the jewel in the crown of the post-1945 welfare state. But aside from occasional token words of sympathy by union heads, committing them to absolutely nothing, no action whatsoever, let alone a sympathy strike, has been organised in defence of the junior doctors.

The isolation of the junior doctors has been reinforced by Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, who was elected last year due to his declared opposition to austerity and militarism and pledge to fight the Tories offensive against the working class.

As could be expected, the Blairite right-wing of the Labour Party, which did so much to set in train the privatisation of the NHS, has been hostile to the junior doctors' action from the very beginning. However, the junior doctors' determined stand has also exposed the claim by Corbyn to represent an alternative path for workers through the refashioning of Labour as an anti-austerity and anti-war party.

Labour has refused to officially support the strike and has confined itself to criticising the government for provoking a protracted industrial dispute. But Corbyn has in all essentials followed this same path.

Rather than calling for the widest support for the junior doctors over the heads of his party's MPs, he has made opposition to waging a class struggle his central concern.

Corbyn has repeatedly urged renewed negotiations with Tory Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, a leading advocate of privatisation. In February, when Hunt first announced that the government intended to impose the contract, Corbyn spoke of his fear that "More strikes now look likely. ... Even at this late stage, I appeal to Jeremy Hunt to go back and negotiate with the BMA."

He made a single token appearance at a protest in London in support of junior doctors in April and since then has maintained a studious silence on the dispute. Indeed, not once during the leadership contest, forced upon him by the right wing, has he demanded solidarity action from the trade unions or defied in any way the treacherous position of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Last week, even as the BMA was forced to call the additional strike days, Corbyn could only stir himself to Tweet, "Government must engage collaboratively and constructively with junior doctors."

Corbyn seeks to blind the working class as to what is at stake in the junior doctors' dispute with his claims that goodwill on all sides can bring about a just settlement.

Health workers face a political struggle against the government, the media and the state apparatus committed to reversing every single social gain ever made by the working class, including the right to public health care. As Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the government of former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, wrote in the *Financial Times*, "Brexit gives us the chance to finish the Thatcher revolution."

For this reason, in waging a fight against such a ruthless opponent, junior doctors cannot limit themselves to an attempt to wage a militant action through the BMA—which is in any case utterly hostile to such efforts. They are engaged in a political struggle that must be based on the mobilisation of the entire working class in defence of the NHS on which millions rely. And they must recognise that, in the Labour Party, they confront a pro-capitalist party no less hostile to them than the Tories and just as determined to see their struggle defeated.

The NHS FightBack campaign was initiated by the Socialist Equality Party to urge junior doctors and all health workers to take their struggle out of the hands of the BMA and other health unions and establish rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy.

An appeal must now be made for a unified offensive by all NHS workers and for the mobilisation of the entire working class and young people in defence of free and universal health care.

For such a struggle to be waged effectively requires above all the building of a new and genuinely socialist leadership in opposition to both the trade unions and the Labour Party—whoever leads it.

For further information contact:
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