

Striking teachers and junior doctors in the UK speak on their struggle

Our reporters
17 March 2023

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking workers in different sectors this week in Britain. Among them were junior doctors employed by the National Health Service and teachers.

London

Rachel, a junior doctor at London's King's College Hospital, said, "Junior doctors have effectively had a pay cut since 2008. When you take into account inflation and pay freezes, we've had a 26.1 percent pay cut, and if you take into account inflation now, that's why we're asking for 35 percent in pay restoration.

"I work in liver medicine, so I work in the transplant service. I get to give people transplants that are worth hundreds of thousands of pounds for free. We see in livers the results of things like alcohol and fatty liver disease, which are a sign that our society is becoming more unequal. Cutbacks and a loss of earnings is something that's affecting everyone and is going to have an impact on everyone's health.

"It's a deliberate policy choice that's been made to open the way for a sort of private health care. Ever since I've been a medical student or working as a doctor, we've been told we are inefficient, that NHS doctors don't understand how businesses work, that we need to function like a business."

Another junior doctor said, "We're fighting to save the NHS as well as for ourselves. I lived in America for 24 years and I came back to work in the NHS. I couldn't work in that system [in America]. Poor people weren't getting the right treatment. And that's what's going to happen here if we don't defend [the NHS].

"I'm having to bring money from the work I did in America in order to survive. I can't afford to live right now on what we get."

Asked if the running down of the NHS was a deliberate policy to enable privatisation, the doctor replied, "I absolutely think it is."

Another junior doctor explained, "Living in London on what

we're paid, and living in accommodation that you want to go home to, not that you dread going home to—I think the majority, at the moment, can't afford that."

Michael, a secondary school teacher, attended the rally of striking teachers, university workers, junior doctors and civil servants in London this Wednesday. He said, "We're here because, of all public sector workers, teachers' pay proportionately has decreased more than any other public sector service."

Asked his thoughts on the Labour Party's opposition to strikes, he said, "I used to be a Labour member, but I left about 18 months ago... they're useless. I don't actually believe that a Labour government would change much. I don't think any of the things that the Tories have done... I don't think Labour would actually repeal any of it like. Each new policy that the Tory government comes out with Labour just say that they would do. Where are they today? Would we have a better chance of getting a pay rise with labour in power? I don't think so."

Sheffield

Stephen, an Art and Design and Photography teacher of 21 years, was the union rep for the NASUWT union at King Edward VII school in Sheffield until last weekend. He resigned and joined the National Education Union to participate in this week's strikes.

Angry with NASUWT for holding discussions behind closed doors with the government, he said, "It looked divisive, there was no collectivism within this move. [Union leader] Patrick Roach started using terms like 'we have decided'. Sorry, where is the 'we'? There has been no participation or agreement with the members on reaching any agreement. That really angered me. I am disappointed that all teachers are not out. The ballot system is a nonsense and rigged against us."

Speaking about new legislation aimed at blocking the right to strike, Stephen said, "The Minimum Services Levels legislation is outrageous. We fought for the right to strike over 100 years

ago, it's a fundamental human right. The measures are really scary stuff. Each government has created and added to this, but these measures are something else. People understand that our strikes are part of a wider picture. This is why we need a general strike, collective action on a wider scale across all sectors.

"Although the anti-union laws won't allow it, we should just say 'no', ignore the laws and defend ourselves. We are across the road from the junior doctors' picket; they have the same problems. We need to be unified and develop different ways of fighting."

John, a teacher at a Sheffield school, told our reporters, "I've been a classroom teacher for a decade. I'm out on strike today demanding improved pay and reduced workloads. Mental health problems are common amongst teaching and support staff. There is a huge funding shortfall at schools across the UK which means there's a lack of teaching resources and buildings that are not fit for purpose."

Charlotte, a teacher at King Edward VII School, explained, "We've had an effective pay freeze for a decade so things have come to a breaking point. Teachers previously got a five percent pay rise, and that came out of other school budgets with no increase the following year, so all that happened is that support staff pay was cut and class sizes will go up. It has to be a funded pay rise."

"One of the most concerning things for us in our direct experience at King Edward is the underlying motive of the government to privatise everything and turn schools into academies. Also, parts of the National Health Service are being farmed off to private companies. We've just had an Ofsted [inspectorate] report that is forcing us to academise—the last secondary school in Sheffield to have this happen."

Aaron, a history teacher at a Sheffield secondary school, said, "I'm in my first year in a school with a high proportion of disadvantaged kids that need help recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic."

"The situation is that we're overworked and massively underpaid. We're trying to help kids catch up on three years of disrupted education on a shoestring budget. I live with three other teachers and we work many extra hours and on the weekends do marking and lesson planning. We come home, we work, we plan. We don't get a break."

"There should be more workers out on strike together. We're close to a general strike for the first time in a hundred years. Enough is enough. We need a general strike. More unions need to bring out their members in industrial disputes. We need more consistent action. This has been the best, most disruptive, action so far with two days of strike action."

"There's money for war and upgrading the Trident nuclear missile system. Our kids ask us about Trident [nuclear weapons] and how much it costs. We want them to have a better-funded school, resources they don't have, and a better education."

Manchester

Charlie, a junior doctor at Manchester Royal Infirmary, told us, "We're here in order to protest and fight. Our pay has been eroded as a result of inflation since 2008 by 26 percent. Our job has become harder as a result of failures within the NHS and austerity."

"We all know that the NHS service that has been provided is unsafe at the moment. Patient safety is our top priority. And yet we can't guarantee that in the way that we'd like. Why? Because of austerity."

Worthing

Ram, a junior doctor at Worthing Hospital described how "We are haemorrhaging doctors and there are times where you'll turn up to work and you'll be seeing three doctors, from what should be six doctors, overnight."

"You can see money [available]... but it doesn't reach the people it needs to reach. It doesn't pay the nurses, the paramedics, doesn't pay the rail workers. It doesn't pay everyone else who deserves a good living wage. I think the country really needs to get behind everyone who's going on strike."

Asked about the £11 billion allocated by the Sunak government to the military in this week's budget, Ram said, "It just shows that you can find the money from somewhere if there is need. You'll find the money. We should not start wars.. and these wars are partly being funded by us by making all these weapons and shipping them out to all these countries that use them."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact