

Junior doctors strike begins as British Medical Association offers government deal to “call off the strikes”

Robert Stevens
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Tens of thousands of junior doctors across England began a four-day walkout on Tuesday at 7am, the longest stoppage of involving National Health Service (NHS) workers in a strike wave stretching back to last December.

The doctors are members of the British Medical Association (BMA), which has around 50,000 members, and the smaller Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association (HCSA) representing several thousand.

Doctors are fighting for a pay increase, after having their pay held down by a series of pay freezes and below inflation deals since 2008. According to the BMA, junior doctors have suffered a pay cut of 35 percent since then, when measured on the basis of the Retail Prices Index inflation rate.

The underpaid and overworked doctors play a critical role, comprising around 40 percent of the medical staff of the NHS. The last strike by the doctors—a three-day walkout in March, led to around 175,000 appointments and operations being cancelled. This week’s strike is set to have an even wider impact with hospitals having to cancel between 250,000 and 350,000 outpatient appointments and operations.

Junior doctors were on picket lines in every NHS Trust, while several thousand attended a BMA organised rally in London’s Trafalgar Square before marching past the Downing Street residence of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Many carried homemade banners with slogans including “Claps don’t pay the Bills” and “A Pay Cut a Day Keeps the Doctor Away.”

One doctor posted on Twitter his monthly wage packet, showing his take-home pay of just £1,823.50, with the comment, “If you are wondering why we are

striking. This is my payslip right at the very end of my second year as a doctor.” Included in the pay slip was the monthly deduction for the doctor’s student loan of £145.

Showing the widespread support of workers for the struggle of NHS workers, the tweet was viewed 6.6 million times within 24 hours.

Despite the mass mandate among its membership for industrial action, the BMA has not set a pay demand, instead vaguely calling for “pay restoration”. What this will amount to in practice has been made clear by the BMA leadership declaring it will consider any pay offer from the Conservative government.

The union pleaded last week for a “credible offer to enable negotiations”, from Health Minister Steve Barclay, to prove he is “really serious about ending the junior doctors’ pay dispute and suspending next week’s strikes.”

At a rally in Trafalgar Square, the leadership continued to make appeals to Barclay and Sunak. Dr. Arjan Singh of the BMA’s junior doctor committee said that Barclay had been avoiding talks, so when the demonstration stopped at Downing Street he wanted to “relay the message [to Sunak] so that we can find him [Barclay] safe and sound, so eventually we can come to the negotiating table.”

In 2016, the BMA betrayed a year-long strike by junior doctors, resulting in the imposition of a vastly inferior contract by the Tory government and laying the basis for the worsening of pay and conditions that provoked the current dispute.

Aware of the militant sentiment of junior doctors who voted almost unanimously for industrial action in February’s ballot, the BMA feigned to the left, with

Singh stating that “For far too long we have been congenial and submissive toward the government, who has taken advantage of us and abused our good character.”

He declared that the BMA was “asking nothing more than for £14 to go to £19. We’re not asking for the money that we could get in other countries.”

Speaking to Sky News earlier Singh emphasised that “pay restoration”—i.e. a 35 percent wage increase—was only ever a starting position which the BMA would instantly cave in on given the chance. He declared that after Barclay refused to entertain talks on an above inflation deal, “We’ve wrote to him again, we’ve extended the olive branch. And if he can give us a credible offer that we can take to members, if he thinks a junior doctor is worth £19 an hour, we will call off the strikes.”

Singh told the rally, “The following months are going to be very difficult. Your union will back you to the hilt. We will not sell you out. There will be no weak or feeble action. To the registrar’s here, this is a new BMA and this is not 2016. This is a BMA that is unashamedly pro-doctor and for you. This opportunity will not arise again and we must win. If we fail now, it is forever.”

No-one should be fooled by such language from a union bureaucrat. Years of experience show this is the surest sign that a betrayal and a sell-out is on its way.

The Socialist Equality Party warned junior doctors throughout the 2016 dispute of a BMA capitulation. In our assessment of the sellout, we wrote:

“Forced to call strikes due to widespread anger, the BMA was always ready to sign a rotten deal with the government. In May, the BMA agreed in all essentials to government demands. And when this proposed sell-out deal was rejected by doctors in July, BMA leader Dr Johann Malawana resigned.

“His replacement, Dr. Ellen McCourt, was widely promoted as a ‘left’ and a ‘militant.’ But despite the government’s unprecedented intervention against the doctors, McCourt continued the fraudulent narrative that the dispute was not political.

“The isolation and defeat of the doctors was

imposed first of all by the BMA, but it is ultimately a product of the collective efforts of the entire labour and trade union bureaucracy. No supportive action was taken by any other union, even those within the NHS, such as UNISON.

“As for the Labour Party, the decision of the BMA to announce its sell-out on the day that Jeremy Corbyn won re-election as party leader is striking. To date, Corbyn never once sought to make an appeal for action to be taken in defence of the junior doctors during his re-election campaign, or to differentiate himself in any way from Labour’s position of merely urging compromise by the Tories.”

A number of Corbynite, including Yannis Gourtsoyannis and Pete Campbell, in the leadership played a critical role in the 2016 betrayal as the members of the BMA’s junior doctors committee.

The new leadership of the BMA, a number of whom are former members of the Momentum group set up in support of Corbyn’s Labour leadership, offers no alternative.

NHS FightBack, an initiative of the Socialist Equality Party, urges doctors to draw the lessons of the 2016 strike and turn to the necessary formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the BMA bureaucracy. Taking control of the dispute, these committees can reach out to nurses and other NHS workers to organise a counter-offensive against the Sunak government and the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales seeking to impose similar attacks on pay and conditions.

Contact and join NHS FightBack today. NHS FightBack Facebook here and Twitter here.



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