

Britain's radiographers and doctors continue NHS strikes, as union bureaucracy seeks sell-out

Robert Stevens
30 July 2023

Workers in critical sectors of the National Health Service (NHS) continue to strike in opposition to long-term de facto pay cuts. On July 25, radiographers held a 48-hour strike at 37 health trusts in England. Strikers represented about a quarter of the radiography workforce in England. The strike was the first ever in the profession.

Radiographers are responsible for taking x-rays, ultrasounds, MRI and CT scans. According to the Society of Radiographers (SoR), 90 percent of patients attending hospital have some form of investigation administered by a radiographer for acute diagnosis or treatment.

The SoR members oppose the government's imposition in May of a well-below-inflation 5 percent pay rise (and two one-off payments of a minimum of just £1,655) on one million NHS staff in England on Agenda for Change contracts. Falling pay has led to staff shortages as it becomes more difficult to recruit and retain staff. A 10 percent vacancy gap in the workforce has left one million patients waiting for radiography diagnosis and treatment.

The SoR leadership was forced to call the strike after members voted down the Conservative government's pay imposition.

The radiographers' strike followed a five-day stoppage from July 13 by junior doctor doctors in the British Medical Association (BMA) in England, who rejected a six percent plus £1,250 consolidated increase pay offer. The junior doctors are also being balloted to extend their mandate for industrial action, as required under anti-strike legislation. The ballot closes August 31.

Last week, the BMA announced that junior doctors

will walk out for a further four days from August 11-15 in a fifth round of industrial action.

On July 20, more senior consultant doctors in the BMA and the British Dental Association (BDA) held two days of industrial action. Doctors provided "Christmas Day levels of cover", with only emergency care provided. They are opposing a government pay offer which the BMA said was "less than 6% for consultants, once all elements of pay are considered." This real-terms pay cut is on top of a 26 percent erosion in pay over the last 15 years.

A further two day "provisional strike" by consultants on August 24-25 was announced by the BMA last week.

While the immediate issue driving industrial action is pay, among the main concerns of health workers is the chronic underfunding of the NHS, hindering doctors' ability to provide a reliable service. Compared with 2019, there are 900 fewer fully qualified full-time doctors. Last year, almost 700,000 people were forced to attend A&Es as they were unable to see a doctor. Research published this month by the Liberal Democrats found that one in six GP appointments over the past year involved waits of two weeks or more.

Last week, *Pulse* magazine published the results of a survey with 362 General Practitioner (GP) partners finding that many would be prepared to withdraw their labour in order to secure more funding. GPs are demanding increased investment for their surgeries, over and above the paltry 2.1 percent annual raise in funding offered by the Conservatives.

The survey found that more than half were prepared to withdraw routine services for a day, while a third said they would consider closing services for a week.

The *Times* reported, “Six in ten said they would be willing to take strike action that involved sending urgent patients and those needing a same-day appointment to A&E. Eight in ten would support reducing the number of services they provided, meaning GPs could reduce evening or weekend hours.”

The *Times* noted that GPs are considering taking industrial action even though, “Closing surgeries would involve a significant financial cost because the salaries of staff would need to be covered.”

Despite the sentiment in all sectors of the NHS to fight, the BMA is working overtime to ensure there is no unified offensive of its members who hold a powerful position in society. With the onset of strikes by NHS workers last December, including the radiographers’ strike, more than 800,000 appointments were delayed or cancelled. The industrial action by nurses, doctors, ambulance crews and other NHS staff took place with the overwhelming backing of the working class, opposed to a government offensive aimed at slashing billions in NHS funding and its further privatisation.

Months on, the BMA is doing nothing but begging the Tories for a slight increase in their offer in the hope that this will be enough to sell to their membership and end remaining strikes. Last month, announcing a 6 percent pay rise for NHS consultants, speciality and associate staff (SAS) doctors, salaried dentists and salaried GPs, This after Prime Minister Rishi Sunak declared the offer “final”, adding, “There will be no more talks on pay. We will not negotiate again on this year’s settlements. And no amount of strikes will change our decision.”

The SoR leadership is holding out its begging bowl, with the *Financial Times* reporting that the society’s executive director Dean Rogers “said further walkouts could be prevented if ministers agreed to match the pay rise of 6 per cent offered to other public sector workers for 2023-24 and extend it to those on freelance contracts.” This is with CPI inflation still at almost 8 percent and the more accurate RPI measure at 10.7 percent.

BMA chair, Professor Phil Banfield, said his union will hold an indicative ballot of GPs unless the government negotiates a new contract “fit for purpose”. He told the *Times*, “At this rate, the whole of the medical profession will be in dispute at the next general

election.”

Such an offensive is exactly what the BMA and other unions have colluded with the government to derail, calling off strike after strike throughout the NHS and other critical sectors of the economy, including the rail and postal services, and pushing through real-terms pay cuts to end a strike wave that began a year ago.

That the radiographers and doctors are fighting alone in their disputes points to the terrible consequences of the union bureaucracy’s sell-outs in the health sector finalised in May and June. On May 2, the representatives of 12 unions on the NHS Staff Council voted by majority to accept the government’s below inflation offer.

The largest nurses’ union, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), was forced to defer as RCN members in England had already voted in April to reject the derisory offer in defiance of a recommendation to accept by the union’s leader Pat Cullen. The RCN ended the strike within two months, when the union’s members, after being involved in fruitless strikes for five months with most of their co-workers no longer involved in disputes, failed to reach the 50 percent turnout required under law in a strike renewal ballot.

Health workers cannot wage a successful fightback against the Tories and defend the NHS outside of building a new leadership in opposition to the corporatist trade unions. Workers should read the assessment by NHS Fightback, published to mark this month’s 75th anniversary of the NHS.

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