

UK: Junior doctors strike sees the Times demand slashing funds to NHS “insatiable machine”

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Thousands of junior doctors in the National Health Service (NHS) in England completed a four-day strike Monday—the fifth round of action held by the doctors since the turn of the year.

After working with other health worker unions representing nurses and ambulance staff—among over a million NHS workers—to impose well-below inflation pay deals of 6 percent or less, Rishi Sunak’s Conservative government has insisted that junior doctors accept the same. The British Medical Association (BMA) has rejected the offer and is balloting its junior doctor membership to extend their six-month mandate for industrial action, as required under anti-strike legislation. The ballot closes August 31.

Junior doctors are fighting for a pay increase of 35 percent having suffered a decade-and-a-half of pay cuts, with pay eroded by nearly 30 percent. The basic hourly rate for junior doctors is just £14.09.

As with previous strikes, the doctors ensured an emergency service was provided.

Doctors’ determined stand has been met with vicious denunciations by the government and their right-wing media echo chamber. Health Secretary Steve Barclay wrote an op-ed in the *Daily Mail* attacking “further unnecessary strike action this week, which serves only to harm patients and put further pressure on their own colleagues”. He reiterated that the government pay offer was “final”.

The most significant attack came from *The Times*, owned by strike-busting oligarch Rupert Murdoch. It published an editorial in its Saturday print edition under the provocative headline “Parallel Universe”. Its message was that the gloves had to come off in confronting the doctors, virtually alone in continuing strikes now that the trade union bureaucracy has sabotaged almost every other

national dispute.

The *Times* argued, “No one, not even the ideologically driven members of the BMA’s junior doctor committee, which represents hospital doctors below the level of consultant, can seriously imagine that the government, in a time of strained public finances, could possibly offer even a third of what is being demanded. To think that 35 per cent is anywhere near realisable is to inhabit a parallel universe.”

NHS staff, including junior doctors, won massive support from the working class during industrial action since last December. Many workers recognised that what was at stake was not just a pay rise, but the future of the NHS which the government plans to dismember and fully privatise.

No slander against junior doctors is too big. The editorial continued, “People suffer or die if they [doctors] are not there to provide diagnoses or treatment. Theirs is the most non-trivial of pursuits. The corollary of this argument is that when doctors are not there—when, for example, they strike—people suffer and die.”

Referring to NHS waiting list now heading to more than 8 million—entirely the result of the Tories’ budget cuts and their homicidal policies at the height of the pandemic—the editorial predicted “a million appointments and procedures will be cancelled by the end of the four-day walkout on Tuesday morning.”

While careful to state, “It is hard to pinpoint a death from a strike”, the filthy attack proceeded: “But research suggests that every four-week delay in cancer surgery increases mortality by up to 8 per cent. And NHS backlogs are already serious: Cancer UK says 40,000 cancer patients have experienced potentially deadly postponements to treatment. Strikes lengthen waiting lists, so strikes kill. Eventually.”

The *Times* complains that “the stoppages have so cost the NHS £1 billion, money that could have been used to treat people”.

Slandering the doctors as murderous and avaricious leeches, the rant of a newspaper which routinely celebrates the wealth of the super-rich and social inequality declares, “Their [the junior doctors] detachment from the real world borders on the offensive.”

The naked class character of *The Times*’s attack was made clear in the concluding paragraph of the editorial. Crocodile tears now freely flowing, it stated, “These strikes are doing more than harming the NHS today. They expose the unavoidable funding challenge facing a service that after 75 years is showing its age in terms of its financial model. For all the complaints of doctors, record sums are being ploughed into this insatiable machine, and yet 11 per cent of the entire population is now on an NHS waiting list.”

This meant that “Financing health provision in future will demand a new approach — like that in Germany involving mandatory health insurance. It may fall to Labour to grasp this nettle.”

The significance of the last sentence must be understood by health workers. *The Times* makes its cynical privatisation pitch knowing that Labour is committed to carrying out this social counter-revolution.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the outset of the latest strike how “this fight is not simply about the here and now, as the Tory government continues its offensive eviscerating the health service and carrying out further privatisation measures. There will be no let-up under any Labour government should it come to power. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer has declared that the ‘big government chequebook’ will be closed and Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting denounced health workers as ‘obstacles’ to the ‘unsentimental reform’ of the NHS required, boasting, ‘We are not going to have a something-for-nothing culture in the NHS with Labour... I’m not prepared to pour money into a black hole.’”

The ruling class is on a war footing. As the strike got underway, with the BMA’s junior doctor committee (JDC) sticking to its demand for full pay restoration, the *Daily Mail*, *Express* and the *Sun*—Murdoch’s tabloid—all attacked the strike as politically motivated and aimed, using Barclay’s words, “at bringing down the Government.”

Their attack was launched in response to the statement of JDC co-leader Dr. Robert Laurenson, who said the BMA would not call off strikes if they were offered by the

Tories the 12.4 percent pay rise that led to action being called off in Scotland. The Scottish deal followed a significantly below inflation 4.5 percent pay rise the year before. Laurenson said, “No, because the governments are very different. With the Scottish [National Party-Green Party] Government there’s a basis for having a working relationship to negotiate in the future. The Government we have are hellbent on using the pay review body to suppress our pay.”

The *Sun* reported the BMA’s response following Barclay’s attack on the strike as “politically motivated”: “The strike in England is not aimed at ‘bringing down’ the Government. A change of government wouldn’t end this dispute, only a fair pay deal will.”

But with a dispute whose victory is essential to the survival of the NHS, winning must involve a massive political struggle.

The Tories, with Sunak their third prime minister in a year, have only been able to stay in office and impose their deepening assault on the working class thanks to the role played by the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party in shutting down strikes. By throwing off these restraints, the working class can relaunch the strike wave in a joint fight against a class-war government slashing all public services to enrich the oligarchy and fund war abroad.

The junior doctors can play a leading role. They must take control of the dispute through the formation of rank-and-file committees in every hospital and NHS facility, operating independently of the union bureaucracy. Through these committees, they must fight to expand the strike to include all doctors and other health workers in a common struggle against low pay and the destruction of the NHS.

Their efforts can become the spearhead of a political struggle by workers against the twin parties of big business, based on a socialist strategy to defend the NHS and the right to free, high-quality public health care.



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