Meet BMA's sellout of junior doctors in England with socialist opposition to Labour government

NHS FightBack
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Junior doctors in England are to be balloted in the next weeks on a sellout pay deal negotiated by the British Medical Association's (BMA) junior doctor's committee (JDC) with the incoming Labour government. The "online referendum" will take place between August 19 and September 15.

NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, urges the 44,000 doctors to reject a deal that does nothing to end nearly a decade and a half of pay erosion.

The JDC agreed to 22.3 percent over two years, barely above 11 percent a year. The agreement seeks to end a dispute which has seen 44 days of strikes since March 2023 in pursuit of a 35 percent pay rise, which would take pay for junior doctors back to their 2008 levels. The offer is just 1 percentage point more than that offered last year by then Conservative Health Secretary Victoria Atkins and will be eaten up by the slightest increase in inflation.

The agreement met opposition from doctors who took to social media pledging to vote the deal down.

The last strike held by the JDC was a five-day stoppage against the Conservative government between June 27 and July 2 in the run up to the general election. Labour won office on July 4 and incoming Health Secretary Wes Streeting declared that his main priority was ending the dispute.

At talks on July 9, he made clear that the government would not sanction a 35 percent pay increase, which he and party leader Sir Keir Starmer had insisted was "unaffordable." Any agreement would be on the terms of a government pledged to "ironclad" Thatcherite fiscal rules.

The junior doctors' dispute is one of only two remaining national disputes which began during the strike wave of 2022/23—along with the train drivers' struggle—which had not yet been ended by the union bureaucracy with a sellout deal.

The BMA/JDC were intent on ending the dispute despite their members just three months prior renewing a strike mandate on a 98 percent majority. JDC joint leader Dr. Robert Laurenson said, "This was definitely a collaborative talk, and I think it's fair to say we have no plans at the moment to call for strike action."

The WSWS noted that demanding a "credible" offer was crucial in the BMA ending industrial action in Scotland and Wales for pay settlements with the Scottish National Party and Welsh Labour governments well below pay restoration. As junior doctors were taking their last strike in England before the general election, the JDC announced June 28 it had ended the pay dispute in Wales, recommending the Labour-run Assembly's offer of a 12.4 percent uplift.

The JDC began talks with Streeting on July 18, with formal negotiations beginning July 23. Six days later, on July 29, the JDC announced it had secured a "credible" offer it could put to members.

The deal includes a backdated pay rise of just 4 percent for 2023-24, on top of a 9 percent rise already offered by the Tories, as well as a rise of 6 percent in 2024-25 recommended by an independent pay review body. It includes a consolidated payment of £1,000.

The agreement was announced in time for Labour Chancellor Rachel Reeves to laud it a day later in her first speech in office, cited as the clearest proof of the mantra, "If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it."

Reeves told Times Radio that such settlements mean "We will get our public finances back on a firm footing," adding the deal would cost just "£350 million—and that's a drop in the ocean" as "it cost £1.7 billion to our economy last year because of industrial action."

Junior doctors oppose sellout deal

A Reddit post, "Never accept the first deal, vote reject!"

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met with hundreds of positive responses and denunciations of the JDC. One doctor wrote, “BMA had a mandate to deliver FPR [Full Pay Restoration]. No more, No less. They need to only put it to the members if it means FPR, anything less is abdication.”

Other responses on the JDC’s X account read, “The tweet mentions ‘pay restoration’. What ever happened to ‘full pay restoration’?!” and “It’s twisted. It’s just 4 percent from last offer. We doing some random biased calculation and making it 22 percent. Who are we fooling guys??”

On Facebook, a doctor noted, “They have added several years’ pay rises together to get a headline grabbing 22% when inflation accounts for 16% of that. Nowhere near the ‘pay restoration’ that the BMA wanted.”

Another pointed out that the shoddy deal is “before the cumulative loss of income from striking borne by the members is considered.” Junior doctors did not receive any strike pay from the BMA, costing just in the strikes to February this year at least £3,000 in lost income and often more than £6,000.

The JDC agreement with the most right-wing Labour government in history enables Streeting and Starmer to proceed with their privatisations, cost-cutting under the guise of “efficiencies,” and increased workloads.

At the outset of the dispute, the JDC launched strikes stating that its leadership, which emerged after the BMA’s betrayal of the 2016 national junior doctors’ strike, would not betray this time. In April 2023, JDC member Dr. Arjan Singh told a rally, “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.”

Having first claimed their agreement with Streeting was a “good step forward,” and worth recommending acceptance, Laurenson now tells Times Radio, “I don’t think that this is a good deal … I think doctors should rightly be sceptical about it.” But in a series of WhatsApp messages “sent to colleagues” and leaked to the *Times*, he ruled out industrial action for a year at least!

Laurenson wrote, “The power dynamic has swung too far towards [the Labour government] for us to successfully achieve anything via strikes right now” and Labour “are utterly ruthless at the moment.” Therefore, “I would consider striking with a low threshold for 25/26 when Labour’s honeymoon period ends,” reiterating that a “window of opportunity [for strikes] is about 12 months away.”

Laurenson speaks for the entire trade union bureaucracy, fully onboard with Starmer’s corporatist agenda to serve the ruling class on the basis of a “real partnership between government, business and unions.”

The struggle of junior doctors demands the deal is thrown out in a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy. Doctors must turn to the creation of rank-and-file committees, operating independently of the trade union apparatus. These organizations must begin with the needs of the junior doctors and be democratically controlled by them.

Such committees must turn out to other health workers in struggle against the Starmer government, including senior consultants demanding more resources to save the National Health Service. Doctors will find ready support from the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is organising struggles of workers through the public and private sectors internationally.

The necessity for a socialist perspective

The lessons for the working class from the junior doctors’ struggle are critical. As the WSWS explained of the trade unions’ sellout of struggles of over 2 million workers to end the 2022-23 strike wave, the nominal political sympathies of the bureaucrats, whether a trade union is categorised as “left-wing” like the BMA/JDC or “right-wing” like the GMB, matter not a jot.

The inevitable sellouts are carried out by a bureaucracy that owes its privileges to its role as a corporatist industrial policeman, imposing the attacks demanded by the employers and the government on pay and conditions. The only way forward is the adoption by workers of a socialist perspective, based on opposition to the capitalist system which is defended to the last by the capitalist parties and the union bureaucracy.

NHS FightBack, established by the Socialist Equality Party and affiliated to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, seeks to organise workers throughout the healthcare sector. Get involved today.

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