

# Residential doctors begin strikes against Labour government and real-term pay cuts

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Fifty-thousand resident doctors employed by the National Health Service (NHS) in England began a five-day strike Friday in pursuit of a pay increase. The strike is the 13th walkout out since the doctors first took action in March 2023 against the then Conservative government to address years of pay erosion, with the lowest paid doctors on just £14 an hour.

The resident doctors (previously known as junior doctors) also demand an adequate number of training places be made available by government, with 30,000 doctors applying for just 10,000 places this year. Health Secretary Wes Streeting's offer of just 1,000 more training places means that thousands of qualified doctors will still not be able to get an NHS job.

*See WSWS interviews with doctors on the picket line here.*

The strike followed the breakdown in talks last month between the Labour government and British Medical Association (BMA). Streeting has refused to budge an inch, refusing demands that the pay of resident doctors be increased to a level which reverses years of pay restraint. Instead, he has imposed a take it leave it offer of 5.4 percent for the 2025-26 financial year.

In rejecting the offer, the BMA stated that under its terms "pay erosion against RPI [Retail Prices Index inflation measure] will be at 21%. Or, put another way, resident doctors are still working more than a fifth of their time for free. A pay uplift of 26 percent is needed to reverse it."

Seeking to enforce pay restraint, following the BMA's strikes announcement Streeting stepped up denunciations of resident doctors he accused of holding the country "to ransom", with claims they would hurt patients needing treatment. In response to a resident doctor speaking to LBC Radio, who said that he didn't want to be striking but was fighting for a pay increase

reflecting his worth, Streeting tried to turn the public against the strike, insisting, "Own it and own the damage it will do to your patients".

In a speech to managers at the NHS Providers conference last week he said the upcoming strike was "morally reprehensible" and "we are going to plough on regardless" in keeping pay down. Setting the stage for legislation to ban strikes by doctors—a demand being strenuously advocated in the right-wing media—Streeting said, "It's becoming increasingly clear that the BMA is no longer a professional voice of doctors—they are increasingly behaving in cartel-like behaviour".

Streeting has support from across the political spectrum, with Labour government-supporting *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee denouncing the resident doctors in a column headlined, "This week's doctors' strike is another test of Wes Streeting's mettle. He is right not to buckle". Praising Streeting's rock bottom offer of a 3.6 percent pay deal for nurses, midwives and physiotherapists, Toynbee wrote, "The doctors have done better than others, which is why Streeting can't and won't give in." She claimed that Streeting "has been eager to settle with them but has been snubbed by the BMA's ungracious haste to strike."

The pro-Conservative *Telegraph* saluted the health minister in a piece published Saturday, "Wes Streeting vs the toxic union behind Britain's doctors strikes", lauding him for "not hiding his contempt for militant BMA bosses". The newspaper cited a former NHS trust chairman, Martin Gower, denouncing the "extremely militant" BMA who "clearly don't give a damn whether anyone dies because of their strikes, or indeed how many die because of their strikes."

Streeting became the *Telegraph*'s poster boy for his

pledge—when in opposition to the ruling Tories—to implement NHS cuts and to escalate its privatisation in defiance of workers he denounced as “obstacles” to his “reforms”. He received glowing praise for a glut of right-wing statements including, “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”; and the NHS is “a service, not a shrine,” which is “going to have to get used to the fact that money is tight”.

The *Telegraph*’s latest endorsement comes amid speculation that Streeting is priming a leadership bid to replace Prime Minister Keir Starmer, with Labour’s support polling at record low levels.

In the face of this offensive, the BMA leadership has repeatedly sought a compromise where none is on offer. In a November 5 statement ahead of the strike, the BMA—which was on record that it would accept a deal for “as little as a pound” an hour in extra pay—complained, “We have also been clear with government that they can call off strikes for years if they’re willing to offer a multi-year pay deal that restores pay over time. Sadly, even after promising a journey to fair pay, Mr Streeting is still unwilling to move.”

As the strike got underway Friday, BMA resident doctors committee chair Dr. Jack Fletcher said, “These strikes did not have to go ahead and the government can stop them even now with a decent offer on pay and jobs.”

Such apologetics meant that—as with its previous single strike against the incoming Labour government in July last year after which it agreed a pay settlement which still didn’t resolve pay erosion—the BMA ensured that its latest action was barely visible. There are over 700 NHS hospitals in England, yet the BMA authorised only that pickets be mounted at 14 hospitals on a “regional” basis on the first day of the strike—with just three more locations announced for the November 17/18 strike days. The capital, London, which has 84 NHS hospitals saw pickets assembled *at just one*—St Thomas’ Hospital in Westminster, across the river from Parliament.

The struggle by resident doctors must be the spearhead of a fight by all NHS workers fighting for a living wage and better conditions. But this cannot be won under a leadership seeking a change in course

from a government operating as the tool of big business pledged to austerity and public spending cuts—and a ruling elite which wants an end to a public health service freely available to all, with an annual budget of around £200 billion.

NHS FightBack, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, calls on all health workers to defend resident doctors and take the fight into their own hands. We call for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees across every hospital, trust, and department, independent of the union apparatus, democratically controlled by workers and committed to the defence of pay, conditions, and patient care.

**NHS FightBack is holding a Zoom meeting on Tuesday November 18 at 7 p.m., “Defeat Starmer–Streeting Budget Cuts and Privatisation”. We encourage resident doctors and all NHS workers to attend; Register here.**



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