

UK resident doctors speak from the picket lines: ‘It’s about us making a stand for the future of the NHS’

Our correspondents
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Resident doctors spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters on the picket lines at hospitals around England on Friday at the start of a walkout for five days in the National Health Service (NHS). The doctors are fighting for pay restoration and tackling widespread unemployment in the profession.

Those gathered on the picket lines under pouring rain explained the reasons why they were renewing the strike against the Starmer Labour government with discussion over the NHS FightBack statement widely circulated, “Make resident doctors’ strike a united NHS fightback against the Starmer government”.

Doctors stressed the same core issues: pay that has fallen sharply in real terms, impossible workloads, and a training system locking out tens of thousands of fully qualified doctors while patient waits grow longer and services deteriorate. They described an NHS starved of staff and resources, with creeping privatisation and a government refusing to provide the funding needed to sustain a safe, functioning health service. The strike, they made clear, is a fight to defend both their future as doctors and the future of a publicly funded NHS for all. There was also opposition expressed to social inequality and the wealth of the billionaires, the growth of the extreme right and scapegoating of immigrants, the Gaza genocide and billions being diverted for war.

London – St Thomas’ Hospital

Adam: “We’re out here on strike for two reasons. One of them is pay, which has been significantly eroded, doctor’s pay has fallen the most out of all public sector workers. Currently our pay is 21 percent below what it should compared in real terms in 2008.

“The second reason why we’re here is because of the lack of jobs. This year alone we had 30,000 doctors apply for just 10,000 training posts. We’ve got 20,000 doctors who are locked out of training. These are fully qualified doctors who want to be your next GP, your next Accident and Emergency (A&E) doctor, your next surgeon or cardiologist. We need more jobs for these doctors. We need them to be trained. We’ve got 12 hour waits in A&E, we’ve got patients waiting months for hospital appointments, weeks for GP appointments. There are doctors willing to be your next specialist but we don’t have enough jobs to go around and patients are suffering.”

Will: “Workers across the country are seeing their pay squeezed the

cost of living is soaring and yet there are record numbers of billionaires in the country. I think it’s only by standing together as like a trade union realising our power in the workplace that we can try and reverse trends and build more equality in the country.”

Ed: “We are setting an example to put ourselves out there and strike. Striking is probably the only way we’re really going to get a message across. Not just for us but for other healthcare professionals, because like Will said we’re all struggling. Everyone’s struggling to find the reasons to do it anymore when it’s all getting so difficult to get pay restoration. I’ve just started training, I’m quite nervous for the future. He’s part way through and he’s got lots of mates who are struggling or leaving. It’s just not looking good for the future.”

Cambridge – Addenbrooke’s Hospital

Dr. Alex Bolton: “I’m a doctor who’s working in A&E. And every day when I go into work I see patients who have been waiting tens of hours to see a doctor, who are laid in the corridor, and these are people who could be your daughters, your husbands, your grandparents. The pay is important because we need doctors to be valued in the UK, so they don’t leave the country, and the jobs are important so that we have enough doctors who are employed to look after these patients. So these waits in A&E, these waits for your GP appointments don’t happen.”

Schnell: “We can’t go on being unable to provide the best possible care for our patients. In the last five years of me working in the NHS, the points when I’ve really been burnt out and disheartened is coming home from a 13 hour shift after running around, giving life-saving care to patients who might be bleeding out, needing emergency surgery, even a lot of cardiac arrests, our patients’ heart have stopped and bringing them back to life. But not being able to do so in a timely manner or the best way possible, because we’re under-staffed and under-resourced.”

Manchester Royal Infirmary

Shehza: “There’s a real issue with divisive tactics now with the

government and the media. It's sad because we're on strike for better patient care and for better patient safety. What we're seeing is chronic understaffing, poor retention of staff, people are going abroad because it's just so horrible in the UK right now within the NHS. This is a long-term issue, it's not something that happened overnight, it's been building over years and that's what causes poor patient safety and care.

"There is emergency staffing in place currently with the strikes, it's not like we've just up and left. We don't want to be on strike either; it's very much a last resort. It's not about us trying to worsen patient safety, it's about us making a stand for the future of the NHS, not just for staff but for patients as well, for the whole country. It takes drastic measures unfortunately, when the government don't listen to you.

"It has to do with years and years of underfunding of trying to subsidize the NHS by lowering wages, by trying to hire other staff instead of doctors. We've seen a big rise in physicians associates, nursing practitioners—which of course are needed and we need them to function as an NHS—but it doesn't make sense to give them more roles of doctors whilst actual doctors that are in medical school graduating can't then train as doctors or aren't being paid enough.

"I see this kind of far-right increase across the world, here in the UK as well with Keir Starmer saying he supports the Union Flags and he has them in his living room. It's scary for us as well. I'm an immigrant, I was not born in the UK, but I came to live here and it's scary when divisive tactics start to work and start to divide us as a people when our real power is together. We see an increase in war spending which is just horrific because there's real complicity in genocides and war across the world and all our struggles are connected.

"In Palestine there's been a systematic destroying of the healthcare system. We see healthcare workers have been specifically targeted throughout the past two years and it's a terrifying thing when you're trying to save people, you're trying to improve the care of innocent civilians and you can't do that. Our government is complicit in that and refuses to take a stand against it. It's scary where the world is heading for sure. All of our struggles are related."

Leeds General Infirmary

Two resident doctors striking at Leeds General Infirmary (LGI) who asked to remain anonymous gave a stark account of job insecurity and overwork of NHS staff.

One explained "We are portrayed as greedy doctors, and it's just it's just not the case. For us, my biggest fear is not having a job after seven years. And I think once you take the time to sit with your colleagues and tell them, they are really shocked that's even the case because they're crying out for doctors. They reply, 'If we had another one of you, we would be so much better off today'. At the weekend, a nurse came to me at six o'clock at night. She said 'I'm sorry, but I genuinely feel light-headed. I haven't had any water. I've not been to the toilet all day or had anything to eat.'

"She had been told that neither had other people and that we're all in this together. Well, I say, no, that's not what we're about here. It's not safe. Privatisation is very well hidden. It's not publicised. The public don't always see that little sections of the NHS are already private. Lots of services are outsourced to private companies."

A colleague added, "The reasons for the strike are not being properly explained. People don't really understand, but if I sit down with someone at work who's against it and I explain to them, 'Look, I've been at university for five years, I've worked for two years, and then I'm not able to get a job after all that.' Then they're shocked, they understand that it's awful and they change their mind. But in general people don't really understand.

"The media response is that we're greedy and just asking for more money. Working in the NHS feels like you're in a sinking ship. Something needs to change and I don't know what. But I do think Keir Starmer is not providing the NHS with the resources and money it needs."

Sheffield – Royal Hallamshire Hospital

Maddie: "There are two reasons I'm on strike. Firstly, we are underpaid, but I'm mainly here because of the small and diminishing number of speciality training jobs that are available for junior doctors. I think it is something like only 12 percent of 60, 000 applicants get a training post, so facing unemployment is not uncommon.

"The continual pay erosion affects us in so many ways. For example, you've paid for five years to go through medical school and then it's impossible to save any kind of money to get yourself a place to live. There's no security.

"Privatisation is going on, and I personally would not be comfortable working in a private system. We all benefit from a free health system, which I think is important.

"It's shocking when they say there's no money to pay health workers, yet billions are poured into weapons of mass destruction."

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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