

Resident doctor tells NHS FightBack meeting: “The immense threats we’re facing require an immense counteraction”

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NHS FightBack held a lively well-attended meeting on Tuesday titled, “Defeat Starmer-Streeting budget cuts and privatisation! For a united fightback by NHS workers!” It was held as five days of strike action by resident doctors, focusing on pay restoration and the lack of specialty training posts, was set to conclude.

Participants opposing restructuring and austerity cuts included resident doctors, other National Health Service (NHS) workers, and others including postal service and education workers.

Tony Robson, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that NHS FightBack was established by the Socialist Equality Party in 2013 to assist health workers build rank-and-file opposition to massive cuts and the privatisation drive. That offensive was carried out by the then Conservative government and is now being intensified under the Labour government.

The meeting was addressed by resident doctor Sophie. She responded to questions regarding the dispute, the conditions confronting NHS workers, the role of the British Medical Association (BMA) doctors union and what perspective and programme is needed to defeat the austerity agenda of the Labour government.

Sophie reviewed the issues in the dispute: “Over 50,000 resident doctors have been on strike across England for the past five days over pay restoration and a lack of specialty training posts.” She explained the determined character of the struggle: “already some 50 days of strike action have taken place, and this is the 13th dispute of resident doctors since March 2023”.

The doctors are demanding a 26 percent pay rise to overturn the pay erosion they have suffered since 2008 as opposed to the 5.6 percent offered by the

government.

Sophie noted the challenges trainees face: “The UK is severely under-doctored per head of population, compared to comparable countries. From 2016 to 2024, applications for specialty training programmes rose by 174 percent, but training posts increased by only 6.4 percent. [Health Minister] Wes Streeting’s response has been to offer a measly 1,000 new training places over the next three years, although over 20,000 doctors have been locked out of training this year alone.”

She warned that the NHS faces “creeping privatisation and a government that’s determined to wage war on it.”

“Streeting has publicly accused resident doctors of: ‘holding the country to ransom’ and being ‘morally reprehensible’ for striking. His increasingly authoritarian tone—including hints at restricting NHS workers’ right to strike—shows how far Labour is prepared to go to defend corporate interests.”

Sophie drew attention to the dire conditions in which doctors and NHS staff are forced to work: “There is chronic understaffing. In my hospital, doctors work below minimum staffing levels more than half the time. More than 1,700 patients are forced to wait at least 12 hours in emergency departments.”

She exposed the repeated efforts of the BMA to sabotage their dispute and the fraud of the “negotiations” they are holding with Streeting. “The BMA is willing to accept a ‘gradual reverse of the cuts’ and even to accept as little as ‘a pound an hour for the next four years.’”

Sophie explained, “We’re in a situation where even the smallest reforms are not and cannot be offered by the government which is at the whim of the markets.

So, the point I really want to get across is—when faced against such an uncompromising government, the unions seeking to find a compromise is a useless task. By doing so, they’re actively blocking a unified mass movement.

“These immense threats we’re facing require an immense counteraction. We cannot place our hopes on the unions. For our patients, our colleagues, and our healthcare system, we must take this fight into our own hands. We must demand that the billions that are wasted on war and private profit be redirected to fund the public health service.”

The meeting heard a report from Ajitha, a senior nurse. Responding to Streeting’s vitriol against the doctors strike he said, “It is the language of a government waging a political offensive not only against resident doctors, or even the NHS, but every worker in the UK... For them, this is not simply a dispute over doctors’ pay. This is about reshaping British society to prepare for economic war with global rivals, soaring military spending, and the slashing of essential services and workers’ living standards at home to pay for it.”

A wide ranging discussion followed the reports.

Richard asked, “How long before we really turn up the heat? It’s clear Starmer and Streeting are pulling no punches, and I almost never hear anything about things getting better!” In response speakers reiterated the importance of drawing the political lessons of the 2023 strike wave which could have led to a general strike. This was prevented by the trade unions, including in the health sector, who opposed and blocked such demands and subordinated that movement to placing hopes in an incoming Labour government. This despite what Starmer’s Labour Party was preparing, including explicit statements by the Labour leader and Streeting attacking the NHS and its workforce.

A doctor from Wales said, “I find it deeply depressing as a new doctor in the NHS how there’s still not full consciousness that our issues as workers are interconnected. The issues pointed out by Sophie also aren’t unique to England, depressingly, I’m not a doctor in England but skeleton staffing, unsafe rota gaps, running on goodwill are all realities here too.”

There was an extensive discussion on the role of Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana’s Your Party. A participant asked if Your Party and the Greens could be

pressured to “something for us”? In reply speakers explained how Your Party stood silent under conditions of a venomous attack on the doctors by Streeting. This speaks volumes about its character. Workers were directed to read the material published by the SEP on the formation of Your Party and our open letter to its supporters.

Robson explained “Your Party oppose the understanding that politics is class based and promote the fraud that the trade union bureaucracy are the guarantors of workers’ interests. The role of the trade unions in suppressing the class struggle has been witnessed for decades. They promote the delusion of reforms and that all problems can be resolved within capitalism. This is a bankrupt and dead-end programme.”

Milan raised, “Understanding how public money actually works is urgent for anyone fighting for a safe, staffed NHS. The UK government creates money when it spends; taxes mainly control inflation, not ‘fund’ services, and markets do not finance the state.”

WSWS writer Laura Tiernan responded, “The dictatorship of finance capital is the economic relationship that dominates over every aspect of social life. There is massive wealth, but it is in the hands of a few billionaires. To transfer the wealth to meet social need requires a mobilisation of the working class and the creation of new types of organisations, as the trade unions are not in that fight. This is the aim of the call to build independent rank-and-file committees which must be linked internationally.”

The meeting ended with an appeal to join and build these committees in every workplace and to attend the Socialist Equality Party public meeting being held in London this Saturday on Trump’s drive to establish a Presidential dictatorship. “The American Volcano: Toward Fascism or Socialism” is being addressed by David North, the chairperson of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Tickets can be purchased here.



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