

Union leaders smear resident doctors in *Guardian* hit piece

Tony Robson
7 April 2026

The *Guardian* has published a scurrilous attack by unnamed union officials against resident doctors backing the Starmer government's enforcing a below RPI inflation 3.5 percent pay award against half of all of medics in the National Health Service (NHS).

Around 50,000 members of the British Medical Association (BMA) in England are taking their fifteenth round of strike action since March 2023 for pay restoration, to reverse a real-terms erosion by around one-fifth since 2008.

The April 4 article, "Unions privately voice misgivings over BMA pay demands and doctors strikes," is a public denunciation of resident doctors made on the eve of the strike that began April 7. The only thing "private" about it is the anonymity of the union officials cited, so they are not held accountable by their members while the *Guardian* presents them as the "voice" of NHS workers.

The unattributed comments from "senior union figures" complain that resident doctors are demanding too much and acting in a "chaotic fashion." This echoes the slanders of Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who has branded the upcoming strike as "reckless," and his Health Secretary Wes Streeting, who has accused doctors of "holding the country to ransom."

The *Guardian* has consistently witch-hunted resident doctors, with columnist Polly Toynbee urging Streeting to show his "mettle."

The broader aim is revealed in a telling admission from one "senior figure" who states, "The deals we have been able to present to our members are becoming a much tougher sell." This is a frank acknowledgment of growing resistance within the NHS workforce and the mounting difficulty for the union bureaucracy in imposing sub-inflation deals.

More than one million NHS staff employed under the

Agenda for Change (AfC) pay system are facing an even more miserly award of just 3.3 percent for this year. This covers most workers across the service from nurses, midwives, paramedics, healthcare assistants, administrative staff, porters, and support workers.

The *Guardian* devotes its pages to union bureaucrats whose chief complaint is that the continued strike action by resident doctors is making it more difficult to enforce another year of real-term pay cuts. Resistance must be quashed to enforce austerity.

Last year, Streeting praised the "constructive" approach of other NHS employees—praise directed properly toward union leaders who helped impose a 3.6 percent award on nurses, healthcare assistants, paramedics and other NHS staff. That deal had been rejected in ballots by Unison, Unite, the GMB and the Royal College of Nursing, but these were non-binding indicative votes deliberately structured to exclude industrial action.

The *Guardian* article shows the lengths the union bureaucracy will go to in fostering division, with claims that resident doctors are generating "resentment" among other NHS staff. This is incitement cultivated by officials who have enforced year-on-year pay erosion.

The unnamed union leaders' political alignment with the Starmer government threatens the very existence of the NHS. Under the banner of "reform," Starmer and Streeting are accelerating a restructuring agenda that includes cuts disguised as "efficiency savings," the expansion of outsourcing to private providers, and renewed reliance on Private Finance Initiative-style arrangements that funnel billions of pounds in public funds into corporate profits. These measures are a deepening of the long-standing bipartisan drive by Conservative and Labour governments to dismantle the NHS as a publicly funded, universal service.

The NHS strike wave of 2022–23 was deliberately demobilised by the union bureaucracy, which imposed below-inflation deals under the Conservative government while channelling opposition behind Labour. Having been brought to office with the support of the union apparatus, the Starmer government is now implementing an even more aggressive programme of restructuring and cuts, using the unions as its enforcement mechanism.

The resident doctors' strike reflects the inability of the BMA resident doctors committee to secure any agreement with the Starmer government that does not betray the central demand for pay restoration, while also resolving the unemployment crisis in an understaffed and underfunded NHS.

The smears against resident doctors must be rejected. NHS workers should demand to know who spoke to the *Guardian* claiming to speak in their name and demand their removal from leadership positions.

The briefings by anonymous union officials against the strike is a wake-up call for NHS workers and the entire working class. What is required is not the suppression of the struggle of resident doctors but its extension.

All health workers must undertake a united fight for substantial pay increases, improved staffing levels, and the defence of the NHS as a fully funded public service. Such a struggle cannot be waged through the existing union structures, which function to contain and dissipate opposition.

New forms of organisation are required—rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy.

Above all, this requires a political break with the Labour Party. The Starmer government is an instrument of big business and the financial elite, set on reversing whatever remains of the social rights won by the working class while diverting the taxes drawn from the working class to fund military spending to back war in Ukraine and genocide and war in the Middle East. Its programme of fiscal restraint, restructuring, and militarisation is incompatible with the preservation of the NHS and every other public service.

Only through the independent mobilisation of the working class, armed with a socialist programme, can the resources required to rebuild the NHS be secured. This struggle is not confined to Britain, but forms part

of an international fight by healthcare workers and the working class against austerity, privatisation and war, which NHS FightBack advances as an affiliate of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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