

BMA sells out junior doctors' pay fight in partnership with Labour government

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The BMA junior doctors committee has pushed through a shabby pay deal agreed with the Labour government to end the longest running industrial dispute in National Health Service history. The sellout goes even further than the ditching of the mandated pay claim. The BMA junior doctors committee has made a pact with a Labour government which is on the warpath against the NHS.

Junior doctors in England had taken 44 days of national strike action since March 2023 based on the demand for pay restoration of 35 percent to reverse the real terms loss of wages since 2018.

BMA junior doctors committee co-chairs Dr Robert Laurenson and Dr Vivek Trivedi blocked any strike action following Labour's election in July to rush into talks with Wes Streeting, appointed as Health Secretary. In opposition as shadow health secretary, he had broadcast Labour's hostility to the strikes and stated he would reject the claim if elected to office, joining the Tory chorus that the demand to restore wages to pre-austerity levels was "unaffordable."

The talks in July were not negotiations but a rehearsed capitulation. Streeting said he would bring the junior doctors' leaders into government talks to demand an immediate end to dispute. Laurenson and Trivedi accepted the surrender terms after previously offering the Sunak government to wind up the dispute on the basis of a "credible offer".

The pay settlement was packaged as a two-year agreement from 2023-2025 to provide the headline figure of 22.3 percent. This figure includes the 8.8 percent already imposed by the Conservative government plus a further 4.05 percent for 2023/4 and 8 percent in 2024-5. Laurenson and Trivedi have faithfully echoed Streeting that this represents a "journey to pay restoration".

The results of the online referendum on the deal between August 19 and September 15 were announced on Monday after 45,850 junior doctors had voted and it was

far from a ringing endorsement. The vote to accept was by a 66 percent majority on a 69 percent turn-out. Despite the pressure exerted to accept, 34 percent voted against. As a measure of the demobilisation which has taken been conducted, junior doctors had voted in March to renew the strike for pay restoration by a 98 percent majority on a 62 percent turnout

The BMA junior doctors committee claims that achievements have been made, including the government reclassification of junior doctors as resident doctors and receiving pay for additional hours worked!

Trivedi told the BBC that the increase for some doctors paid just over £15 an hour to £17 an hour marked a change of "trajectory" and recognition of their valued role. The joint statement by Laurenson and Trivedi issued after the acceptance vote shows exactly where junior doctors are in their "journey" to pay restoration: "There is a still way to go, with doctors remaining 20.8 percent in real terms behind where we were in 2008."

They then claim that "The resident doctors committee, as we will be called, will be using the next months to prepare to build on their success so that future cohorts of doctors never again need to see the kind of pay cuts we have."

Junior doctors have the right to ask, 'What the hell are you talking about?'

It was only last week that the Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer said in a speech to the Kings Fund there would be no additional funding for the NHS without "reform", as he pledged to face down "loud opposition" to changes "which would not be universally popular."

The speech was to demonstrate that Labour would set about attacking the NHS on behalf of the corporate and financial elite. Asked by the media whether the doctors' unions would welcome productivity reforms to the NHS workforce, Starmer replied that he would take on anyone who was an "inhibitor of change".

The debasement of the term “reform” to mean socially regressive market-orientated policies has been starkly exposed in the NHS, which has been driven to the brink by such measures. Far from fixing the “broken NHS”, as Streeting has declared, he is the personification of Labour’s drive to complete its dismantling.

Streeting, speaking at Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in July, denounced the “begging bowl culture” of the NHS. For more than a year he has built up his constituency within the right wing media to issue screeds against the NHS, surpassing any Tory: “We are not going to have a something for nothing culture with Labour” and “I’m not going to pour money into a black hole”. He has cited the health system of Singapore favourably to make the case for a privatised and/or semi-privatised model.

The rationing of NHS funding will not be applied to the private sector, which will be encouraged through ramped-up outsourcing under the pretext of reducing the backlog of operations, allowing health corporations to cherry pick the least complex and most profitable.

The Labour government is scapegoating overstretched NHS staff as the source of the crisis afflicting the run-down service, with demands for more overtime and introduction of new technology to increase productivity.

Silence over this agenda by the BMA junior doctors committee denotes consent. The pay settlement paves the way for the union bureaucracy to offer their services in return in ensuring a strike free environment. Streeting declared that the health unions should end their “sabre rattling” over pay and work with him in partnership. They have answered the call.

This is the reset switch Labour refers to on industrial relations with the trade union leaders, who are being made into partners of the government and big business.

The train drivers’ two-year strike and the junior doctors’ action in England were the two remaining national disputes from the 2022-3 strike wave of rail, postal and telecom workers, NHS staff, teachers and lecturers that was demobilised by the union bureaucracy based on sellout agreements. They have now both been delivered the same blow.

ASLEF’s sub-inflation pay deal with the Labour government was accepted by train drivers in ballot results announced Wednesday. This was also based on union recommendation. ASLEF pushed the rotten pay deal on the grounds that the productivity strings demanded by the Tories had been withdrawn. But Labour Transport Secretary Louise Haigh stated immediately after the results were announced that this would clear the way for

“vital reform—including modernising outdated working practices—to ensure a better performing railway for everyone.”

Laurenson and Trivedi, nominally among the more militant of trade union leaders, have managed to turn the fight of junior doctors which had mass public support, especially due to NHS staff saving lives during the pandemic, into a rout.

Throughout the dispute they repeated vapid appeals to the Tory government to restore pay and save the NHS, which met with the uniform response of unaffordability from the Conservatives and Labour alike. They never challenged this from the standpoint of a fight against the prioritisation of profits, the criminal disregard for public health and the “let it rip” policy in response to the pandemic.

Even if the top end of the financial estimate for settling the demand for pay restoration for junior doctors is accepted, this is £2 billion. This is half the £4 billion squandered on unusable PPE in the first year of the pandemic alone. Around 2,000 health and social care workers lives were taken between 2020-2 due to inadequate protection.

The British government has supplied £7.6 billion of military aid to Ukraine and is committed to £3 billion per year going forward in the NATO proxy war against Russia. The Starmer government is promising to provide long-range missiles to be used by Ukraine within Russian territory in a provocative move which threatens world war.

As the NHS Fightback stated in its call to reject the BMA’s sell out deal, the 1.4 million strong workforce of the NHS must be freed from the grip of the union bureaucracy which acts as an industrial police force for a Labour government waging social war at home and military war abroad, based on the fight for a socialist perspective and as part of a unified movement of the international working class.



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