

British Medical Association sells out struggle of UK junior doctors

By Robert Stevens
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The British Medical Association (BMA) has unceremoniously ended the struggle by 50,000 junior doctors, employed by the National Health Service (NHS), against the Conservative government's imposition of an inferior contract.

Last Saturday the union called off a series of planned five-day strikes set for October, November and December. Earlier this month the BMA cancelled the first five-day strike that was set to begin September 12. This was the last occasion in which industrial action could have been held prior to the imposition of the contract, beginning in October. The BMA has now completed this betrayal.

The BMA has capitulated to the government without securing a single concession, despite massive popular support for the junior doctors. Its sell-out has been denounced by many junior doctors on social media, with some declaring the union to be “spineless”, “toothless” and “not fit for purpose.”

Over the last year the junior doctors—all those below consultant grade—held six strikes. In the face of a relentless battery of government and media propaganda denouncing them as “greedy” and “selfish”, they took the first all-out strike, without emergency cover, in the nearly 70-year history of the NHS.

The government claims that the contract is intended to introduce a seven-day NHS to facilitate better patient care. This is a lie. With no additional funding on offer, the real aim is to clear the way for a massive assault on all health workers.

The new contract includes the reduction of unsocial payments for weekend working, with Saturday and Sunday between 9am and 9pm reclassified as normal working days and nightshift rates reduced, along with the elimination of automatic pay progression.

By imposing these terms, the ruling elite is setting a

benchmark for all NHS workers and preparing the basis to press ahead with its plans for it to be dismantled and carved up between private sector “providers”, as set out in its 2012 Health and Social Care Act.

All the more damning, therefore, are the BMA's statements defending its decision on the grounds that the NHS is in such a perilous condition that it could not survive industrial action. The BMA statement said that the strikes were off following “feedback from doctors, patients and the public, and discussions with NHS England about the ability of the NHS to maintain a safe service if industrial action planned for October, November and December were to go ahead.”

Rather than mobilising working people to fight this looming social catastrophe, the BMA is enabling the government to deliver a death blow to the NHS and the principle of universal health care, free at the point of use—by insisting that nothing can be done!

This has been the role of the BMA throughout.

Forced to call strikes due to widespread anger, the BMA was always ready to sign a rotten deal with the government. In May, the BMA agreed in all essentials to government demands. And when this proposed sell-out deal was rejected by doctors in July, BMA leader Dr Johann Malawana resigned.

His replacement, Dr. Ellen McCourt, was widely promoted as a “left” and a “militant.” But despite the government's unprecedented intervention against the doctors, McCourt continued the fraudulent narrative that the dispute was not political.

The isolation and defeat of the doctors was imposed first of all by the BMA, but it is ultimately a product of the collective efforts of the entire labour and trade union bureaucracy. No supportive action was taken by any other union, even those within the NHS, such as UNISON.

As for the Labour Party, the decision of the BMA to announce its sell-out on the day that Jeremy Corbyn won re-election as party leader is striking. To date, Corbyn never once sought to make an appeal for action to be taken in defence of the junior doctors during his re-election campaign, or to differentiate himself in any way from Labour's position of merely urging compromise by the Tories.

The BMA's junior doctors committee (JDC) is led by several Corbyn supporters, drawn from the pseudo-left, including Yannis Gourtsoyannis and Pete Campbell. Only in July, Campbell, recently elected as McCourt's deputy on the JDC, was boosting the BMA, claiming it was being transformed into a fighting organisation. He enthused, "Six months ago I couldn't get the BMA to make a placard. Today we have taken 8 days of industrial action and won significant concessions from a first year Tory government. If the BMA can do this, imagine the labour movement pushing together in one direction."

As the BMA's betrayal was announced, Campbell was quoted by the *Telegraph* stating that the JDC was unable to continue strikes that "all of the feedback said was wrong."

His remarks were in line with the BMA's own justifications, stating that this "feedback from junior doctors and our colleagues...showed their concerns about patient safety and proportionality of the [strike] plan."

There are reports of a spate of resignations from the BMA in disgust at its betrayal. But crucial lessons must be drawn by workers everywhere. There is nothing unique about the BMA's actions. They are the standard operating procedure of every trade union. Wholly committed to the defence of the capitalist profit system and led by a privileged bureaucracy that enjoys intimate ties with the employers, the unions function to regulate and suppress the class struggle. To the extent that they are occasionally forced to call strikes, as was the BMA, it is only so as to let off steam while they facilitate the attacks of government and management and prepare the way for defeat.

The BMA's own justification for calling off the dispute—that the NHS could not survive—makes nonsense of its "no-politics" claims. The defence of every gain of the working class—especially one so fundamental as the right to free and decent health

care—is entirely political. Not a single step can be taken in this direction without breaking the stranglehold of the super-rich over all aspects of economic and social life.

For this new organisations of class struggle are required—the building of rank-and-file committees and, above all, of a genuinely socialist party. Faced with the escalation of attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions, all health workers must draw the lessons of the BMA's actions and break with the pro-capitalist perspective of the unions and the Labour Party. The defence of the NHS must be developed on this basis. To do so, junior doctors, health workers and their supporters should contact NHS Fightback and the Socialist Equality Party to discuss how to take the struggle forward.

For further information contact:
www.socialequality.org.uk and www.nhsfightback.org

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>