

The pseudo-left's role in the defeat of the British junior doctors' struggle

By Robert Stevens
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Britain's pseudo-left groups played a crucial role in the betrayal of the junior doctors' strike, which will result in the Conservative government imposing a sell-out contract this month.

On September 24, the British Medical Association (BMA) called off a series of planned strikes in October, November and December. This ended the yearlong struggle by 50,000 junior doctors employed by the National Health Service (NHS).

The Socialist Workers Party responded to the BMA's betrayal by stating that the "junior doctors' committee buckled in the face of right-wing pressure..."

"A particularly important factor" in the BMA's decision, the SWP continued, "was the lack of solidarity from other unions and the TUC [Trades Union Congress]... the TUC did not call a national demonstration for the doctors and in defence of the NHS. Neither did the Labour Party. Other NHS unions have not called for protests and solidarity with the junior doctors. This made the BMA feel more isolated and mounted pressure on its leadership to back down."

What the SWP does not explain is why, given this was the case, it itself played the role of sowing illusions in the trade unions and the Labour Party at every juncture in the dispute. This was despite the unions ensuring the defeat of every struggle of the working class year after year. In 2015, this led to the lowest level of strikes in Britain since records began in 1893.

In an article at the end of August, the SWP wrote, "The TUC and union leaders should throw their weight behind the junior doctors and help build practical solidarity." One month later, on September 20, the SWP was still bleating, "The TUC and union leaders must now build practical solidarity, not just rhetorical support like the majority showed last time."

This was after the BMA had already cancelled a five-day strike set for that month.

The same article praised two left-talking union leaders, Mark Serwotka and Dave Ward, neither of whom had organised a single struggle of their members in solidarity

with the doctors.

The Socialist Party's brief statement on the end of the dispute says nothing about the BMA's role in the betrayal. It writes instead that the union was "left isolated by the Trades Union Congress after almost a year of struggle, battered by a wave of vicious media bile, added to by threats from the General Medical Council and sections of the medical establishment..."

Despite noting the anger of "many junior doctors" at the BMA ending the dispute, the SP's main concern is that doctors remain faithful to the trade union. The SP states, "An emergency BMA conference of junior doctors should be organised to discuss and democratically decide on next steps for their dispute."

As with the SWP, the SP writes wistfully that if only the other unions and the TUC had fought to defend the doctors, the outcome would have been different. If only, indeed!

Giving an example of what might have been, the SP declares that the public sectors workers union, Unison, which has half a million workers employed in the NHS, "was forced under pressure to move an emergency motion in support of junior doctors at the TUC congress in September." The motion was seconded by the Royal College of Midwives (RCN).

This is a barefaced lie. Far from being in support of the doctors, as presented by the SP, the motion passed committed Unison, the RCN and the TUC to absolutely nothing. It did not demand an escalation of industrial action or the mobilisation of the more than one million health workers against the attacks on the doctors. It stated only that "Congress believes that a resolution to the dispute must be based on a negotiated settlement that promotes the health and well-being of medical staff, high quality services that guarantee patient safety and provides the resources required to deliver fully operational services across seven days."

The motion calls on the TUC to "continue to provide solidarity and support to the BMA and its members" and urges it to "call on the government to lift the imposition of the contract and work with the BMA to resolve the dispute."

The real purpose of the motion was to conceal the fact that the TUC had organised nothing in the junior doctors' defence for a year and to promote its mealy-mouthed call for negotiations with the Tories.

The Tory government picked a fight with the doctors as the spearhead of its offensive against all health workers, aimed at imposing austerity and ensuring the breakup and privatisation of the NHS. As far back as February, when doctors rejected the contract, the government declared it was non-negotiable and would be enforced from August.

The BMA did everything possible to end the dispute. In May, it agreed in all essentials to the government's contract ultimatum. In July, the doctors threw out this sell-out agreement, forcing the resignation of the leader of the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee (JDC), Dr. Johann Malawana.

In response, the government announced that the contract would be enforced from October. The BMA used this as a window of opportunity to wind up the dispute.

From the start, the SP and SWP boosted the BMA as a model of a fighting organisation, promoting the bona fides of members and supporters of various pseudo-left groups who sit on the Junior Doctors Committee.

Among these were Dr. Yannis Gourtsoyannis and Pete Campbell. Gourtsoyannis is a member of the Labour Party and of Momentum, the group established in support of "left" Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Campbell is a supporter of the pro-Labour Alliance for Workers Liberty.

Gourtsoyannis, who was paraded in the *Guardian's* sister newspaper, the *Observer*, as one of "the emerging stars of a newly empowered radical anti-establishment," played a vital role in covering for the BMA's betrayal. Over the last year, Gourtsoyannis has appeared on the platforms of a plethora of pseudo-left groups.

In an article in the SWP's *Socialist Worker* in June, he was pictured speaking at a rally of the SWP-backed "Unite the Resistance" rally. The article was headlined, "Left of BMA's junior doctors' committee opposes new contract deal."

Gourtsoyannis told the SWP he would campaign against the deal agreed by the BMA the previous month, stating, "Members should rest assured that the BMA will honour the outcome of the referendum. If members reject the deal, we will return to battle."

Gourtsoyannis' readiness to toe the line of the BMA is what characterises the politics of this self-professed "Marxist." Last January, he gave an interview to *Socialist Appeal*, the newspaper of the pro-Labour International Marxist Tendency. Gourtsoyannis stated, "Our members are aware that if we are to win this, there may have to be alternating periods of industrial action, interspersed with

negotiation."

In March, Gourtsoyannis sought election to the BMA's Council. His election address stated, "As a member of JDC Exec I have played an instrumental role in the present battle for the future of our contract. My actions and words have been integral to some of the key decisions we have taken as a Union." His candidature was backed by none other than the JDC's leading negotiator, Malawana. Just weeks before Malawana signed the May deal accepting the rotten contract, he wrote on Facebook that while he and Gourtsoyannis "often disagree on policy," Gourtsoyannis "maintains cabinet responsibility." Malawana added, "I am glad to have such a diverse set of voices on my executive."

The unions enforced the isolation of the junior doctors in a joint effort with the Labour Party. Corbyn, despite a mass mandate to oppose Labour's right wing, has spent his first year in office repeatedly capitulating to them.

He only once made a token appearance at a rally of junior doctors, early on in the dispute, and opposed any escalation of strike action. Instead, in line with the BMA, he called for a negotiated settlement.

Speaking at an Alliance for Workers Liberty event in August, Gourtsoyannis responded by insisting on loyalty to Corbyn and Labour, declaring, "If you want an NHS in 2020, 2030 and 2040, do get involved in the class struggle, and the epicentre of that class struggle is and will remain, I believe, within the Labour Party."

He added, "If you are going to defend NHS workers, defend the NHS itself, we can only do that through a mass movement, a mass movement through the Labour Party to defend social democracy in this country."

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