

Crisis of Britain's NHS: Healthcare Professionals Challenge Cameron Government, "The Tories Are Vulnerable"

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Last week saw the first strike by junior doctors in four decades, as thousands of healthcare professionals took action against the attacks on their terms and conditions. The popularly-supported struggle is set to continue next week, as medics carry on the fight against the Tories and their attempts to dismantle the NHS. Dr Tomasz Pierscionek of the BMA reports (personal capacity).

On Tuesday 12th January, over 30,000 junior doctors went on strike for the first time in their lives. The fact that junior doctors have not taken strike action for 40 years adds emphasis to the fact that this is a last resort; a necessary evil to avoid the future consequences – for us and for our patients – that acquiescence to Jeremy Hunt's proposals would involve. We did it for our patients: past, current and future; we did it for the NHS.

The reality is rapidly dawning on many working within the NHS that the Conservatives' aim is to demoralise healthcare professionals, demand that these same healthcare workers do more with less funding, and allow the NHS to fall apart, in order to justify opening it up to privatisation.



On the first day of strike action, I attended my local picket line to join a few dozen colleagues on strike, some of whom had arrived before 8am. Despite the biting cold, morale was high and the support we received from the public, as well as solidarity visits from the Fire Brigade Union and the National Pensioners Convention, was greatly appreciated. Drivers hooted their horns in support and a local councillor attended our picket to underline her support for our actions. Colleagues across England reported similar experiences. Whereas Jeremy Hunt kept a low profile that morning, support from the public, as well as from fellow trade unionists and consultant colleagues, was highly visible. One medic not sharing this

optimistic mood was Hunt's advisor, [Professor Norman Williams, who was forced to explain his boss' media absence](#).

Later that day, my colleagues and I collected petition signatures and spoke with members of the public about our rationale for taking industrial action in one of the many Meet the Doctors events across the country. Public support was again on our side and my only challenge to collecting signatures was the heavy rain wetting the paper and smudging the ink. The day concluded with a rally in central Newcastle where I estimate, despite the now heavy rain and lack of umbrellas, several hundred doctors and our supporters stood undeterred.

[Despite polls showing overwhelming public support for the first doctors' strike to take place in four decades, with 66% in support](#), the usual suspects in the Tory press worked overtime to smear those on strike.

First up was *the Daily Mail*, who tried to launch a red scare by claiming that the "[BMA's senior ranks are stuffed with left-wing anti-austerity campaigners](#)", naming and shaming several BMA activists whose 'militancy' and 'radical' actions included: "[signing] a letter stating Mr Corbyn was the only Labour leadership candidate who could 'resist the Conservative consensus"; donating to the National Health Action Party; speaking at "a fundraiser for Corbyn"; and signing the 'Defend the Link' petition. The Daily Mail propaganda piece sought to paint the picture that the BMA is stuffed with Jeremy Corbyn supporters – a claim that is, unfortunately, not true!

The Sun joined in the attacks too by claiming that "[Junior doctors leading Tuesday's NHS strike over new contracts are champagne-swilling socialists](#)", trying to prove their hysterical smears by showing pictures of doctors on holiday. [This intrusion into medics' private lives was met by a successful satirical response on social media by junior doctors, ridiculing the Sun's crude and desperate propaganda](#).

At the same time, Hunt's clumsy [deceptions about increased morality on weekends continue to be exposed](#).

Such media lies and slander by the right-wing press reflect the desperation of a Tory Party facing ever increasing opposition to their attacks on working people. [Rumours are now circulating that Hunt may return to the backbenches and that the 'poisoned chalice' of crushing 'radical doctors' may be handed to Boris Johnson](#).

The Tory press' attacks also demonstrate the ruling class' fear that the struggle of the junior doctors will inspire other workers and youth, who realise that they share a common cause in the struggle against Tory austerity – the result of capitalism's continuing crisis.

Doctors and others within the NHS are increasingly seeing the link between the attacks on the national health care system and the wider austerity programme being implemented by Cameron's government.

However, due to the logic of capitalism in crisis and the levels of austerity required, the Tories have no option but to attack the NHS and its staff. As a result, in the coming weeks, Cameron and co. are likely to up the ante with their spin, supported by the most reactionary elements of the media, whose attacks against doctors will become even more vitriolic and ridiculous.

The massive support we received from the public, trade unions and other health professionals shall not be forgotten. Tellingly, a union whose members had no experience of mounting strike action -many of whom only became politicised in a baptism of fire over the past several months - managed to stand up to the Tories and put them on the back foot.

The struggle of the junior doctors has shown that the Tories, the most reliable parliamentary representatives of the ruling class, are vulnerable to organised action. But junior doctors are only the first group in the firing line. Consultants also face the imposition of a new unfavourable contract and [student nurses and midwives face losing bursaries](#).

Now, junior doctors, along with the rest of the labour movement, must support our consultant and nursing colleagues in their own battles, as part of a wider fight against the Tories, against austerity, and for a socialist alternative.

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