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HEALTHWORKERS: FIGHT TO MAKE LABOUR PAY UP

Health unions should launch a joint claim for pay restoration, linked to inflation

LABOUR'S SHADOW Health Secretary Wes Streeting has given another clear indication that health workers will have to step up their campaign to force Labour to fund the NHS properly.

In the run-up to a five-day strike by junior doctors in England, Streeting said he was 'beyond furious' with the BMA and demanded doctors abandon their action.

Junior doctors rightly rejected this outrageous demand. Streeting claims he will be on the phone on day one of a Labour government to negotiate with the union.

But health workers should have no confidence in a shadow health minister who takes donations from private health companies and has made no secret that his prescription for the NHS is more of the privatisation and short rations that has taken it to death's door.

IT'S RIGHT TO STRIKE

The Tory press complain that it's 'not fair' for junior doctors to strike during an election when the government can't negotiate. But this dispute has been running for over a year. The Tories calculated that allowing the strikes to go ahead would enable them to blame out of control waiting lists on strikes, instead of on 14 years of underfunding, outsourcing and privatisation.

They know that in all probability it will be a Labour government that will have to negotiate an end to the dispute. That's why the election is the best time to take action—and focus the minds of voters and Labour leaders on the NHS crisis.

The BMA is demanding a phased 35 percent rise to compensate for the loss of real-terms pay during austerity. In England, the Tories imposed an average pay increase of around 9 percent for 2023/24, while in Scotland, junior doctors accepted 12 percent.

The junior doctors' position has shifted over time as the union's position has become more isolated. After a year of strikes, it is likely that an offer by an incoming Labour government of a deal similar to Scotland would be recommend-

ed for acceptance by the junior doctors committee.

This would be better than what the Tories are offering but it falls far short of what is needed—and what is possible to get out of a Labour government which promises that only they can be trusted with the NHS.

But winning a real commitment to pay restoration means forcing Labour to find the money, and mounting a wider political campaign to oppose Labour's plans to solve the crisis on the cheap through privatisation and overtime.

A UNITED FRONT

That means fighting for a united front of all the health workers' unions. The new pay year started in April, but there's no sign of a pay rise.

The trade union leaders will try to give an incoming Labour government a honeymoon period. The government will try to play divide and rule with the workforce.

Unison, Unite and the RCN should put meet a new Labour government with a common proposal for a pay rise that restores pay to 2010 levels—not over five or ten years, but now, when health workers, the health service, and the millions of workers who depend on it, need it.

The division of one million health workers into several professional and general unions is an obstacle to fighting unity. In many workplaces, organisation is so bad that Unite and Unison can't even get 50 percent of their members to vote in a ballot on industrial action.

To overcome this, health workers need to organise in every trust, and across every local authority to put forward their own demands and fight for them.

We can start this by forming joint committees of shop stewards and delegates from each health union in each workplace, to organise solidarity with the junior doctors strikes and discuss a platform of joint demands and the common action we'll need—whoever wins on 4 July.

- Restoration of real-terms pay to 2010 levels
- All pay linked to inflation—1 percent for 1 percent
- Fund the NHS by expropriating the private health giants.

THE NHS: SAFE IN LABOUR'S HANDS?

THE NHS is facing a historic crisis. After the Tories' criminal mismanagement of the Covid pandemic, waiting lists have more than doubled, more than 300,000 patients have been waiting more than a year for treatment. These delays lead to worse patient outcomes and unnecessary deaths.

The ever increasing waiting times are a symptom of deep structural issues in the NHS. Although touted by some on the left as a 'socialist' project, in truth the NHS is highly capitalistic in its organisation. This has been a crucial element of the NHS from its inception, with private 'partnerships' acting as GPs and dentists. And of course Big Pharma was never nationalised.

The tendency towards free market ideology in public services was accelerated by the Thatcher regime's introduction of the 'internal market' which turned hospitals into 'Trusts' in competition with each other. Finance officers began to call the shots, overriding clinical staff decisions.

But it was Tony Blair who introduced the Private Finance Initiatives which have led to the profit motive being introduced throughout the health service. This saddled hospitals with huge debts, making the NHS pay the banks' consorita many times over for new buildings and facilities.

More recently, the Tories' austerity programme since 2010 has led to a 25% fall in real wages for health workers, causing a staffing crisis. The removal of bursaries for student nurses and prospect of long hours in terrible conditions led to a staffing shortfall.

This was then made worse by Brexit driving away many skilled migrants who filled crucial positions. The coronavirus pandemic was just the straw that broke the camel's back.

What is Labour's plan to reverse the

years of decline? The headline pledges are a reduction of waiting times, through more appointments being made available, as well as increased access to GPs, dentists and mental health staff.

But apart from 8,500 more mental health workers, the intention is not to hire more staff—instead, the existing staff will be asked to work longer hours.

Staff are already pushed to their limit and drastically underpaid, leaving little incentive to take additional shifts. Without significant wage increases to attract and retain more staff, it is hard to see how any of Labour's pledges will be achievable.

In 2020–21 £11 billion of the NHS budget was spent on contracts with healthcare multinationals, who skimmed a massive profit for the privilege. More privatisation will increase this waste and further break up the NHS.

Starmer's plan will inevitably fall far short of the stated objectives, not to mention the actual needs of the NHS. The plan does nothing to address the crucial structural issues: funding shortfall, internal market, staffing crisis.

Above all the NHS needs a massive cash injection—£32 billion according to the *British Medical Journal*—just to stay afloat. Labour must guarantee these funds in full.

We say:

- Restore student bursaries to train and recruit 50,000 more nurses and 50,000 other staff on wages that meet union demands.
- End PFI, bring all contracts in-house and nationalise the private health companies without compensation, and place them under workers and patients' control
- Tax the rich to pay for a massive expansion and updating of the NHS and social care.

WHAT WE STAND FOR

Behind the Tories and their billionaire backers lies the capitalist system. It is a system that puts millions on the dole, seeks to drive down wages and destroys the environment. It is a system that diverts attention from its crimes by bloody wars, and by dividing up the workers amongst themselves by promoting racism and sexism.

We want a socialist revolution to replace this system with one where production is guided by the needs of the many, not the profits of the few. That means taking the wealth of society, the banks and the major firms, into the hands of the working class and drawing up a democratic plan of production under workers' control.

To get this we have to break the resistance of the capitalist state: the police, courts, army and judiciary and replace it with a new kind of state based on democratically elected and accountable workers' councils.

The working class has the power to do this. It is rediscovering its potential to defeat the bosses through strike action. We think that power should be used to smash capitalism and build a new kind of society without poverty, oppression and war.

We fight for a working class unity and a revolutionary party based on a programme of action:

- A living wage, pension and social security for all, indexed to inflation.
- Controls on prices, rents and bills.
- Workers' control over all strikes and negotiations. For a rank and file movement to dissolve the bureaucracy and create fighting, democratic unions.
- Women's liberation: social provision of childcare and domestic labour. Abortion on demand; gender self-ID.
- No platform for fascists. A workers' self-defence guard to defend communities.
- Open borders: equal rights for all migrants and refugees from day one.
- No to war: Britain out of Nato. For national liberation against imperialism.
- A workers' government based on and accountable to councils of workers' delegates.
- Expropriate the fortunes of the rich to fund public services and a just transition.
- Nationalisation under workers' control of the major banks, transport, utilities, public services, manufacturing.
- A revolutionary party, united with socialists across the world in a new world party of socialist revolution—a Fifth International.



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