

UK healthcare strikes to intensify as junior doctors vote to walk out next month

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This file photo shows the UK's junior doctors holding a protest rally outside the Department of Health in London.

London, February 23 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands of junior doctors in England have voted for strike action next month, their trade union said on Monday, adding to a series of walkouts by nurses and ambulance workers putting pressure on an already strained health system.

The British Medical Association (BMA), which represents some 45,000 junior doctors in England, said 98 percent of those taking part in a ballot had voted in favor of strike action, adding that they will stage a 72-hour walkout next month. The BMA did not give a date for the strike.

Junior doctors agreed in 2019 to an annual two percent pay rise as part of a four-year deal, but say that is now inadequate in light of much higher inflation. "This vote shows, without a shadow of a doubt, the strength of feeling among most of England's junior doctors," the BMA said, adding, "We are frustrated, in despair and angry and we have voted in our thousands."

The BMA describes junior doctors as those who are qualified in clinical training and have up to eight years' experience working as a hospital doctor or up to three years in general practice. They work under the supervision of a senior doctor. British health minister, Steve Barclay, called the vote "deeply disappointing."

Hundreds of thousands of National Health Service (NHS) pediatric surgery backlogs grow by almost 50 percent in two years as NHS leaders and doctors warn adult care is being prioritized over children's, according to NHS data.

"I've met with the BMA and other medical unions to discuss what is fair and affordable, as well as wider concerns around conditions and workload. I want to continue discussing how we can make the NHS a better place to work for all," he said in a statement, using the acronym for the National Health Service.

The BMA says junior doctors have suffered a more than 25 percent real-terms pay cut since 2008, leaving many demoralized and four in 10 wanting to leave the profession, according to a recent survey.

Another trade union for doctors, the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association, said its junior doctor members had also voted to carry out strike action in a separate ballot. That strike, on March 15, involves less than a thousand staff.

The strikes will heap more pressure on Britain's state-funded NHS, which is already stretched by staff shortages and record backlogs, and is now experiencing waves of disruptive strike action by health workers.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government has argued that higher pay rises would only cause more inflation and interest rates and mortgage rates to go up further.

More than 10,000 ambulance workers were on strike on Monday, while the nursing trade union last week announced a fresh 48-hour strike from March 1.

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