

UK protest backs health staff as doctors prepare to strike

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London, March 12 (RHC)-- Thousands of protesters marched through London to the British prime minister's residence over the weekend to support healthcare workers who have held a series of strikes over pay and conditions in the state-funded National Health Service. Almost 40,000 junior doctors, who form the backbone of hospital care, are walking out across England for three days starting on Monday.

The NHS said it would "prioritise resources to protect emergency and critical care, maternity care and where possible prioritize patients who have waited the longest for elective care and cancer surgery," but thousands of appointments and procedures will be cancelled during the 72-hour strike.

A wave of strikes has disrupted Britons' lives for months, as workers demand pay raises to keep pace with double-digit inflation. As well as healthcare workers, teachers, train drivers, airport baggage handlers, border staff, driving examiners, bus drivers and postal workers have all walked off their jobs to demand higher pay.

Unions have said wages, especially in the public sector, have fallen in real terms over the past decade, and a cost-of-living crisis fuelled by sharply rising food and energy prices has left many struggling to pay their bills.

The UK's annual inflation rate was 10.1 percent in January, down from a November peak of 11.1 percent but still a 40-year high. The Conservative government argues that giving public sector staff pay increases of 10 percent or more would drive inflation even higher.

There have been recent signs of progress towards ending the disputes. Nurses, midwives, physiotherapists and ambulance staff last week called off planned strikes to hold pay negotiations with the government. Health secretary Steve Barclay said he would hold talks with junior doctors' representatives if they agreed to call off their walkout.

"Let's have a constructive dialogue to make the NHS a better place to work and ensure we deliver the care patients need," he wrote on Twitter.

But the doctors' union, the British Medical Association, said there had not been "any credible negotiations" and the strike would start as planned on Monday.

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