

The Humbling of Hunt

Junior Doctors Reject Contract

A series of six strikes by junior doctors has provided the strongest challenge so far to the rundown and privatisation of the NHS. The government was surprised by junior doctors' overwhelming support for action and the sympathy they enjoyed from the general public.

The junior doctors' ballot vote against the latest proposals will keep their cause in the public eye. The junior doctors' dispute centres around the Government's determination to extend seven-day working in the NHS to include elective and non-emergency work. Such an unnecessary change is particularly provocative at a time when services are increasingly underfunded.

As the programme of one and two-day strikes unfolded Health Secretary **Jeremy Hunt** thought he had two winning cards to play. Firstly he ordered the imposition of new contracts on the junior doctors from August; rather than causing some junior doctors to give up in despair, his move increased their anger. Secondly, he counted on the public deserting the junior doctors when their colleagues in emergency and critical-care departments joined the action on April 25 and 26. In fact the public's support for the junior doctors was little affected.

Faced with increasing criticism of its conduct of the dispute, the government returned to the negotiating table in May. A new contract proposal was agreed by the doctors' BMA leaders on May 18 but 58% of junior doctors voted to reject it.

Among junior doctors, advocates of the new contract said that premium pay was preserved for unsociable hours worked at the weekend, while critics pointed out that normal weekday working had been extended to 8pm.

The Government's initial proposals and confrontational approach have done great damage to hospital services, on top of the harm already being inflicted by underfunding, reorganisation and competition. New entrants to the medical profession have lost faith in NHS careers to a catastrophic extent with an expected 50% shortfall in doctors and consultants expected over the coming years.

