

VIEWS & REVIEWS

STARTING OUT

We're too weak to strike

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I don't like armpits. Sweaty things. Unpleasant things. Especially when they're not your own. The result of the recent bus strike in London was human beings foisted further into each other's armpits on the tube than normal. It was pretty unpleasant, and this was only the beginning. The insurrection of the bus drivers is planned to carry on until they get what they want.

The best phrase I can find to describe the doctors' strike—sorry, day of action—is “damp squib.” Did the public even notice on 21 June? Strikes are nasty, aggressive things. If you are going to go down this route, there are a few (simple) rules. You have to publicly commit to more action should your grievance not be resolved. Admitting in advance that it is a one off is probably not the best negotiating strategy, nor is announcing publicly that you are not that committed to the cause.

Why did the miners, a group with much greater solidarity than doctors, lose? It has got nothing to do with politics or the waning power of the trade unions in the 1980s. It was for the simple reason that the lights stayed on. Had the country been plunged into darkness, the dispute would have been settled within a few days and the trades union movement might well look very different now.

The bottom line is that doctors are weak. The government knows that we do not have it in us to do what it would really take to make them acquiesce to our demands: a shutdown of entire general practices and hospitals. When the other side knows you are weak, why would it bother negotiating?

Unfortunately, we have been made to look silly without any outside help. The universally negative publicity was entirely predictable, and given our intrinsic weakness makes any further action inconceivable.

No matter how much we grumble, and we do like to grumble, we generally like medicine and we like our patients. We do not want them to suffer, even if it means putting ourselves at a disadvantage. Weakness is usually presented as a negative characteristic, but this sort of weakness is probably something to be proud of, and something the bus drivers could learn from us.

But that is a fantasy. The government is already talking about giving in to the bus drivers, with extra money already made available for them even before the strike took place. Meanwhile, resolve against doctors is hardening. Make of that what you will but I would suggest that you prepare yourself to work longer for less.

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Head to Head: Are doctors justified in taking industrial action in defence of their pensions? (*BMJ* 2012;344:e3175 and *BMJ* 2012;344:e3242, doi:10.1136/bmj.e3175 and doi:10.1136/bmj.e3242); News: BMA council to meet next week to discuss next step in pensions dispute (*BMJ* 2012;344:e4350, doi:10.1136/bmj.e4350); Helen Jaques's industrial action live blog: <http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2012/06/21/helen-jaques-industrial-action-live-blog/>

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