German union representatives on the Polder Model: “Most are satisfied”

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The Academisch Medicinisch Centrum (Academic Medical Centre) is Holland’s largest hospital, with 6,300 employees, including 1,200 nurses and auxiliary caregivers. The *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited the hospital in order to find out how the Polder Model functioned in one of the country’s largest public sector facilities, where privatisation and measures to make labour more “flexible” were already far advanced.

We were met by the “workers’ representatives” on the hospital works council, the chairman, Koos Moens, and Bert Kelner. Both are members of the Abvakabo, an association of Protestant social democratic and Catholic unions

Koos Moens considers himself a “workplace pragmatist” who “has no political axe to grind.” He claimed not even to know what the term Polder Model meant. Bert Kelner, on the other hand, looks back at a longer and more radical past. He was a member of the Dutch Communist Party before it formally dissolved itself and amalgamated with other petty-bourgeois radical organisations to form the GroenLinks. He says he decisively rejects the Polder Model.

Yet, as our discussion revealed, the Polder Model is in full bloom at the hospital. Entire areas like the canteen have already been privatised, and numerous posts rationalised away, including 80 cleaners’ jobs. Some 30 to 40 percent of nursing staff now work part-time.

As reported by the two works council representatives, the destruction of full-time jobs was brought about through the introduction of financial self-management. Since then, the government only provides a continually decreasing budget that must sustain not only the hospital, but also the medical faculty’s research and teaching activities.

The hospital has to “have regard for efficiency much more than in the past,” Moens told us. This also affects research, as sponsors can be found only from the pharmacological industry. Scientists are brought in only on a project-by-project basis, and are employed by a private company founded by the hospital and financed by industry. “When the project is over, say after two years, the researchers have to look on the employment market for another post with another project,” explained Moens.

In Holland, as throughout Western Europe, petty-bourgeois radicals collaborate politically in the unions with the social democratic “pragmatists.” When it comes to subordinating the workforce to the “demands of the market, “no principled opposition can be expected from them. This became very clear in the discussion with the two representatives of the works council

WSWS: “Does the works council support privatisation?”

Moens: “Yes.”

Kelner: “No.”

Surprised by their own answers, the two look at each other a moment, then the chairman explains the contradiction.

Moens: “In principle, no. In principle, we are against privatisation. But in practice, yes. We can save a lot of money that way. You have to look at it like a construction company. They have to precisely calculate every project. People are only hired for a specific time and are only paid for the work they do. Moreover, we don’t have much power. All we can do is negotiate a few compromises. Thus we have got an agreement that for the patients in their rooms and in the operating theatres, the private cleaning service is not used. There it is a matter of quality, not quantity.”

WSWS: “Wasn’t there any sort of opposition from the workforce?”

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Moens: “No, because nobody was sacked. There was a transfer contract for all employees. The jobs which were then cut were lost through natural wastage.”

WSWS: “But the well-paid jobs have gone and the younger generation are left out in the cold.”

Kelner: “That’s right. The young generation has no representation. That is a political mistake. But the unions can’t just keep shaking their fists. Capital simply says: ‘Take it or leave it!’ We have to live with that. At the height of the business cycle the unions are stronger, but in a crisis things look much worse.”

WSWS: “But the business cycle in Holland is at its peak. Aren’t the companies making huge profits?”

Kelner: “Yes, profits are there, but also unemployment.”

Moens: “Still, the unions have just agreed to a contract that will introduce the 36-hour week next year. Wages are only rising by 2 percent, while the rate of inflation is at 2.6 percent. It’s up to us now to see to it that after this wages sacrifice, shorter working hours really come about and new jobs are created.”

Kelner: “Moreover, we have now got May 5, National Liberation Day, off. Albeit unpaid.”

WSWS: “Does the workforce agree with this contract?”

Moens: “I don’t know about that. But it is the only solution, to share out existing work amongst all.”

Kelner: “I can already see some problems with this policy. At some point the employees are going to say, I have lost 20 or 30 percent of my pay over the last years. It can’t go on like this. Then there will be conflicts, at least in private industry. Here in the hospital, things are slightly different. We depend on the government for our money and luckily things are still alright to some extent.”

WSWS: “Do you think that the workers here are satisfied?”

Moens: “Yes, at least most of them.”

Also available in German

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