

German hospital physicians expand strike

Conservative-led states seek confrontation

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In the early morning hours of Friday, May 12, Frank Ulrich Montgomery, the chairman of Marburger Bund (MB), the German physicians' trade union, broke off talks with the chief negotiator for the State Tariff Community (TdL), Hartmut Möllring. Möllring is a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and finance minister for the state of Lower Saxony.

Montgomery announced a significant expansion, beginning May 15, of the current strike by hospital physicians.

Following twelve hours of unsuccessful negotiations and clearly angered by the obstinate stand taken by the public employers, Montgomery declared that the Marburger Bund had gone into the talks "with a readiness to compromise." However, it made no sense, he said, to discuss "with a Mr. Möllring who wants to grant physicians an income increase of just 1 percent."

The "grandiose offer" announced by Möllring at the beginning of the negotiations, held in the city of Dresden, turned out to be a "bad joke," Montgomery added.

For his part, Möllring said he had offered the physicians' union a salary increase of between 15 and 16 percent, and more could not be contemplated "with the best will in the world." His claim was countered by the deputy director of the Marburger Bund, Lutz Hammerschlag, who said the statement was pure demagoguery.

Hammerschlag pointed out that last year the already-low incomes of hospital physicians were further reduced by the cancellation of Christmas and holiday pay and other measures, and the allegedly "generous offer" did not even compensate in many cases for these cuts. He said Möllring was obviously trying to set an example with the physicians and block any real increase in salaries.

Since the beginning of the strike by Germany's 22,000 hospital physicians eight weeks ago, the finance minister of Lower Saxony has been intent on confrontation. In the course of ten rounds of negotiations and several high-level conferences, the physicians' union has signaled its readiness to compromise, but Möllring has continually stalled the negotiations in an effort to bring the union to its knees.

The previous weekend, both sides had agreed to "essential points" in negotiations in Munich, and a speaker for the MB said an agreement was "within reach." But Möllring intervened and called the salary claim "unacceptable" and "wrong," although it represented less than half of the original 30 percent demand made by the doctors.

On German television, the director of the Marburger Bund, Armin Ehl, once again stressed a readiness to compromise on the part of the union. The realistic level for a salary increase lay between 7 and 20 percent, Ehl said. At the same time, he emphasized that it was not just a question of more money for the physicians, but the entire package. Working hours also had to be regulated to change the current situation, in which physicians are frequently called upon to work 70 to

80 hours per week. Doctors were prepared to work up to 48 hours, Ehl said, as long as they were fully paid.

Discussions were due to continue in Cologne last Tuesday, after Möllring shifted the date several times and then suggested the top-level meeting in Dresden which has now collapsed.

Möllring's attitude has led to differences among public employers. The managements at several hospitals have protested against the unyielding and provocative conduct of the negotiations by the TdL under Möllring's leadership.

Several hospitals have even demanded the right to conduct independent negotiations with the union. Mathias Brandis, the director of the Freiburg University clinic, declared that the negotiations conducted by the TdL had been "in actual fact, a disaster." In an interview with German radio, he said, "We would have long ago had an agreement with the Marburger Bund if we had been able to negotiate ourselves."

Many directors and hospital managers are well aware of the catastrophic working conditions for assistant physicians, in particular, and endorse both an improvement in incomes and limits on working hours based on the prevailing conditions in other sectors of the public service. But chief negotiator Möllring has other goals.

"There is something rotten in the state of Germany, and this is shown by the collective bargaining conducted in the physicians' strike," said a recent comment by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, alluding to the unyielding attitude adopted by Möllring. The commentary went on to defend the strike. According to the newspaper, the "many failed rounds of talks" are, above all, a result of the fact that the "exploitation of physicians" is an embedded component of the medical profession.

This is no doubt correct. But there is a broader political context to Möllring's confrontational course.

The finance minister of Lower Saxony belongs to a political grouping in the CDU which, together with prominent business circles and politicians in the "free market" Free Democratic Party (FDP), is putting pressure on the government led by CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel. To these forces, the welfare cuts and attacks on employee rights being carried out by the government are inadequate, and they are being implemented too slowly. The government head of Lower Saxony, Prime Minister Christian Wulf, is a leading figure in this faction on the right of the CDU.

Since taking over as head of the Lower Saxony state government three years ago, Wulf has not only implemented drastic welfare cuts, but has also used the influence of his state administration to undermine the previous basis of union-management negotiations, known as co-determination, at Volkswagen in order to pave the way for mass layoffs. The Lower Saxony state government holds 18

percent of the shares in Volkswagen.

A recent scandal—thoroughly exploited by the media—involving visits to brothels by union leaders that were financed by the VW management was directly bound up with plans for mass layoffs at Volkswagen and the aggressive, pro-big business policies of the Wulf-Möllring government.

Behind Möllring's confrontational stance against the physicians are the same political forces and business groups which sought to bring a CDU-FDP government to power in Germany last year, instead of the Grand Coalition of the CDU and SPD that eventually took office under Merkel. Against a background of growing popular resistance to the social policies of the previous Social Democratic (SPD)-Green Party government (anti-welfare measures such as Hartz IV and Agenda 2010), they sought to enforce the demands of big business at break-neck speed.

They are unconcerned by the fact that their policies were rebuffed by the electorate in the elections held last autumn. They persist in demanding that the Merkel government accelerate its attacks on social standards. They react to every new anti-social initiative of the government—such as the recent call for an increase in the retirement age to 67 by Labor Minister Franz Müntefering (SPD), or the proposals by Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD) for further tax relief for the rich at the expense of the lower-paid—by making new and more exorbitant demands.

Their aim is the abolition of all remnants of the German welfare state, including comprehensive collective agreements, reasonable wages, an eight-hour work day, protection against dismissal, and so on. Instead, they want to impose an American-style system that will allow companies to arbitrarily hire and fire.

Möllring's attacks on the physicians' union are aimed at crushing a union organization with scarcely 100,000 members—one which lacks any extensive administrative machinery and does not have a strike fund. An example is to be set in order to attack workers' rights on a broad front.

In this respect, it is worthwhile recalling the way in which the American air traffic controllers' union, PATCO, was defeated. At the beginning of the 1980s, the term "union-busting" washed over the Atlantic. At that time, the US government under Ronald Reagan provoked a strike by PATCO. All of the striking workers were dismissed, strike leaders arrested, and the union driven into financial ruin. The aim was to achieve a substantial and visible defeat of the workers' movement.

The smashing of the air traffic controllers' union was the prelude to a whole series of attacks on the American working class aimed at enforcing drastic wage cuts and the dismantling of elementary employee rights. At one US company after the other workers were forced to their knees. The smashing of PATCO inaugurated a process which culminated last year in the demand by Delphi, the largest American auto parts supplier, for a 60 percent wage cut for its workforce of 33,000, together with cuts in pensions and health payments.

The bureaucratic apparatuses of the unions reacted to this pressure by moving ever faster and further to the right. The same process is at work in Germany, as was shown by the wild attacks made by the public service workers' union, Verdi, against the physicians' strike. Verdi boss Frank Bsirske dismissed the demands of the Marburger Bund, declaring he had "no understanding" of "such an exaggerated wage claim."

Some weeks ago, Bsirske warned against "excessive concessions to

the medical profession," and tried to turn nurses and other hospital personnel against the physicians' strike. On a number of occasions, Verdi functionaries declared that "the privileges of physicians" would be paid for by the public at large.

The fact that the largest public service union, with more than two million members, has sided with Möllring, adopted his line of argument, and stabbed the physicians in the back speaks volumes. Verdi has thereby lined up with the most reactionary layers of the ruling class.

As was the case in France, where in the midst of mass demonstrations against the dismantling of protections against dismissal, the unions held negotiations with French Interior Minister Sarkozy, thereby strengthening the right wing of the Gaullist movement, Verdi has signaled its readiness to support similar right-wing forces in Germany.

This turn to the right results from the fact that, without exception, the unions have accepted existing social conditions, and thus the logic of capitalism. They draw the same conclusions from the internationalization of production and the dominance of a world-wide financial oligarchy as Müntefering and Steinbrück, who describe international capital as a "shy doe" that must be attracted by drastically reducing business taxes, lowering wages, and intensifying the exploitation of workers.

But there is an additional source for consternation in trade union headquarters.

The fact that physicians have gone on strike for the first time in more than thirty years—without strike pay—and now, after eight weeks, are ready to extend their action indicates a new state of affairs. Anyone who has been able to speak with the predominantly young physicians over the past few weeks has noted their mixture of almost naive enthusiasm and uncertainty. Many strikers have stressed that their struggle has little in common with a traditional trade union dispute.

This is true. Their struggle has not been organized and financed by trade union bureaucrats in order to let off steam, as has so often been the case in recent years. Rather, the physicians' strike demonstrates the emergence of a social layer which might best be called an "intellectual proletariat." Not only in hospitals are university graduates, following long training, forced to work under unreasonable conditions, with low wages, endless hours and no real job security, making any sort of long-term planning impossible—the situation is no better for many technicians, engineers and scientists.

To that extent the physicians' strike is a harbinger of coming social conflicts. It requires above all a political debate over the implementation of a socialist perspective which elevates the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business.



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