

German doctors strike: Verdi trade union continues its strike-breaking role

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In recent weeks the German service workers trade union Verdi has aggressively continued its provocations against striking local hospital physicians. The latest step was the agreement by Verdi to a collective wage agreement which Verdi claims also applies to hospital doctors. Earlier this year, Verdi used the same tactics in its attempt to undermine a strike by state-employed doctors.

The contract struck between Verdi and both the German Civil Service Association (dbb) and the Federation of Local Employers (VKA) envisages an additional €35 per month for non-medical hospital personnel and a wage increase of 10 percent for doctors from August 1. Verdi explained: "With this deal we have made a contribution to more justice for all hospital personnel."

According to Frank Ulrich Montgomery, the chairman of the doctors' trade union Marburg Federation (MB), the new deal agreed by Verdi does not mean an increase of 10 percent, but rather a reduction of 12 percent for doctors when compared to the former employee wage contract (BAT) for physicians. The alleged increase of 10 percent refers to comparison with the new collective agreement for the public service (TVD), which was agreed in October 2005 between employers and Verdi. The introduction of this latter agreement was the trigger for the decision by the Marburg Federation to quit its alliance with Verdi and instead negotiate an independent collective agreement for physicians.

According to the Marburg Federation the new Verdi stipulations would result in pay losses for doctors of up to €640 per month. In addition, no satisfactory payment has been finalised for stand-by shifts worked by doctors. A further disadvantage for doctors lies in the fact that the agreed increase covers longer periods than

was formerly the case.

These regulations correspond to the final offer made by the VKA local employers, which the Marburg Federation had rejected. Due to the refusal of the VKA to submit an improved offer the MB broke off negotiations on July 18 and expanded its strikes. Since then the VKA has refused to budge from its position and even refuses to call for the use of a mediator.

Montgomery referred to the deal as "deceitful packaging." In his view the alliance struck between Verdi and the employers against the physicians' trade union recalled "Mafia-type relations." "The employers are making a mistake when they think the strikes can now be terminated," he said. "This 12 percent reduction only serves to further enrage the medical profession."

The president of the Federal Medical Society, Jörg Dietrich Hoppe, also called the employers' action irresponsible: "One should introduce the offence of political intimidation for the Union of Local Employers' associations."

In the meantime, between 15,000 and 70,000 local hospital doctors in 10 German states and 118 cities are participating in the biggest physicians' strike for many decades. One week ago, 2,500 doctors took part in a major protest demonstration in the city of Hanover.

In an example of strike-breaking which is without parallel in the history of postwar Germany, Verdi is deliberately trying to strengthen the hand of the employers' camp against striking local physicians organised in the Marburg Federation. Verdi used similar tactics against the 13-week-long strike by university physicians in the spring of this year.

After drawn-out negotiations, Verdi concluded an agreement with state employers on May 19, which was also to apply to doctors and thereby undermine the

status of the Marburg Federation. Less than a month later, on June 16, the MB capitulated and agreed to a deal which contained only minimal improvements on the contract accepted by Verdi and which represented a worsening of conditions compared to the former BAT contract.

The Marburg Federation then sought to conclude its own collective agreement for local hospital physicians, only to be confronted with the sabotage tactics of Verdi. As it did in the case of the state doctors' strike, Verdi is once again claiming that the MB is responsible for cutbacks aimed against other sections of workers. According to Verdi, the MB represents the "egoistic" interests of physicians and wants to "ruthlessly" fill their pockets.

Nevertheless, on June 26 the MB declared it would lead local physicians in strike action. For its part Verdi announced it would raise its own demands for hospital personnel who were members of the Verdi trade union. On June 27, Verdi raised a demand for a lump sum of €150 for all local hospital employees. This demand, however, was not connected with a call to go on strike and did not call for cooperation with the MB, but was in fact aimed at creating hostility towards the MB amongst hospital staff.

The shameful role played by Verdi in replacing the BAT agreement with the much more unfavourable conditions of the TVD contract was now repeated in its campaign against the MB. In its press statement the Verdi executive committee declared: "Separate negotiations with the Marburg Federation increase the danger that the burden resulting from cuts in personnel would be shared by all employees, while only physicians would benefit from income improvements." The same statement makes clear that the principal reason for the demand for an extra €150 is to enable employers to exploit all the various clauses and indeterminate formulations in the TVD agreement to which Verdi had previously agreed.

Through its role in the implementation of the TVD contract and now in the current physicians' strike Verdi has revealed its complete transformation into an instrument for the defence of the interests of the capitalist state. Verdi will not hesitate to defend these interests against any form of resistance from public service employees—as is now the case with striking doctors—thereby directly policing and enforcing the

wages policy of the employers.

Public service employees must take urgent note of this development.

In this respect Verdi is playing a similar role to that of the US union federation, the AFL-CIO, exactly 25 years ago. At that time, following a strike by 12,000 air traffic controllers for better working conditions, the AFL-CIO not only refused to support the trade union PATCO, but allowed the Reagan administration to smash the strike and sack all of the air traffic controllers under conditions where they were banned from future employment in public service.

This attack represented a turning point in American trade union history. Since then, US workers have been exposed to incessant attacks on their living standards, culminating in the demand last year by the auto supplier Delphi for a 60 percent wage cut. Verdi's role as strike-breaker indicates that a similar turning point has been reached in Germany, in which the trade unions have become the most important and reliable partners of the employers in implementing wage and welfare cuts.



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