

Growing resistance to union sell-out of Berlin hospital workers

Lucas Adler
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Two weeks after ver.di (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft—United Services Union) struck a deal with the employers and called off the strike by around 10,000 workers at Berlin's Charité university hospital, the vast majority of those affected have indicated their readiness to defy the union and continue their strike.

At general assemblies held last week at all three hospital sites, 70 percent of union members voted for a resumption of the strike. The deal they rejected at these meetings was more or less identical to the employers' offer welcomed by the union when it suspended the strike May 6.

After two weeks of negotiations behind closed doors, ver.di officials failed to achieve a better result, but were merely playing for time. The union wanted the outrage over the suspension of the strike to die down, before workers actually voted on the deal. As it turned out, the tactic backfired.

Staff at the Charité are not only angry at the small pay increase proposed, they are also outraged at the way in which ver.di stabbed fellow workers employed at the Charité Facility Management (CFM) in the back.

The CFM was founded a few years ago specifically to outsource work at less pay for non-medical and nursing services such as catering, cleaning and logistics. It is 49 percent privately owned.

The cancellation of the strike May 6 by ver.di isolated the 2,200 employees of the CFM. The workers there continued their strike for another week, until ver.di closed it down May 14, although the employers had refused to make an offer. All the CFM workers have a verbal agreement that some sort of deal will be reached by the end of May.

The wage offer for employees of the Charité provides an income increase of €150 a month from 1 July 2011

and a further €50 by 1 July 2012. From 2013 there is to be a gradual approximation of wages for Berlin employees to the national average (Collective Agreement for the Public Service [TVöD]).

In addition, the offer includes a one-time payment of €300 for the first half of 2011 and an alignment of job conditions between workers from the east and west of the country. Twenty years after the reunification of Germany large numbers of manual workers in the east receive substantially less wages than their western counterparts.

At the general assemblies last week, most Charité workers made clear that the deal agreed by the unions was insufficient. In particular, workers strongly objected to the ban on industrial action between the union and employers until the end of 2016.

Workers were angry that the promised parity of salaries between Berlin workers and their colleagues in other parts of the country would not take place until 2016. Some staff described the deal agreed by the union as a "blatant provocation", bearing in mind their years of relatively low pay.

When it became clear that ver.di was unlikely to gain a majority for the deal, certain union officials spoke out in favour of a resumption of industrial action, but warned against the risks of escalation. One official argued against a new walkout, for example, by noting that CFM workers could only obtain a contract when the rest of the workforce had agreed their own deal. Nevertheless, despite the various tactics and threats, close to 70 percent of ver.di members at the three locations voted in favour of a resumption of the strike.

This result is a blow to the union. When ver.di officials suspended the strike they falsely claimed that this was consistent with the will of the strikers. Ver.di wrote on its website, "The employer has presented us

with a firm offer, which is worth negotiating on the basis of temporarily suspending the strike. This is the opinion of most of the staff at the three sites”.

In April, 93 percent of union members voted for an indefinite strike in order to improve the poor working conditions at the Charité and the subordination of their socially important work to the profit principle. Ver.di used the strike, however, merely as a means for its members to let off steam while it prepared for the next round of attacks.

The broad support for a continuation of the strike exposes the arguments of pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Alternative group (SAV), which played a leading role in calling off the strike through their member Carsten Becker, who is also ver.di chairman for the hospital workers involved.

The SAV responded to the outcry over the suspension of the strike by claiming that the workers were ultimately to blame for the behaviour of ver.di.

A leaflet issued by the SAV on 11 May states, “It was clear that...many colleagues thought that the employers’ offer was an acceptable basis for negotiations. The strike committee was obviously particularly concerned that the strike in this form could not be sustained and that the gains already won could be lost. We believe that these are legitimate concerns. We do not share the views of other groups who had little or nothing to do with your strike, who now loudly shout ‘betrayal’.... One problem was and is the low number of militants. The strike committee was very busy all week and at the end of its tether”.

Now the union and its pseudo-left supporters are confronted with the need to block the wave of opposition to the contract. Their response is to drag out the process of holding meetings and votes until they get the result they want—acceptance of the contract and a return to work.

Originally ver.di declared that the decision of “the general assemblies” would be binding when it came to agreement or rejection of the contract. However, the union is now arguing that the membership meetings have only a “consultative” character, and it is not bound by their decisions.

Ver.di announced on its website May 20 that a new agreement had been reached with the employers. In fact the “new” deal is identical with the one rejected at the meetings. The only difference is that this new

“improved” deal does not mention the promised one-time payment of €300.

Ver.di described the deal in a press release as a “fair solution, which does not meet all expectations”. On the same day, the union organised a new poll of its members that will run until mid-week. In the course of this struggle, ver.di has repeatedly demonstrated that it is prepared to use tricks and manoeuvres to oppose the will of the workforce and systematically divide hospital workers. The union remains determined to enforce its deal with the employers, including the five-year ban on strikes.



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