

How to win the strike at Berlin's Charité hospital

The Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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On Monday the approximately 10,000 non-medical employees of the Berlin university hospital Charité began an indefinite strike. They are demanding a wage increase of €300 per month and an improvement in working conditions. However, based on the massive cuts that have taken place in the health sector during past years, the wage demand amounts to a drop in the bucket.

For almost a decade Charité employees have faced attacks on their working conditions carried by the Berlin Senate—a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Left Party. These cuts have then been slavishly implemented by the health workers union ver.di (United Services Union). The attacks are not limited to cost-cutting measures at the expense of employees, but also involve massive attacks on the health care of the population. Under the current conditions adequate medical care in Berlin can no longer be guaranteed.

After the SPD-Left Party Senate left the employers' association in 2003 to push wages below the country's average, ver.di sought to pacify workers, and stalled them for several years with illusions in one round of negotiations after another. The union thus ensured a no-contract status at the Charité for several years, and enabled the state-owned enterprise to save some €20 million per year.

When the anger and outrage of workers forced the union to organise a strike in September 2006, ver.di did its utmost to make the walkout as ineffective as possible. Only a tenth of the staff was involved in the strike, and even they did not strike at the same time. After only eight working days, ver.di called off the strike by signing a wage agreement.

The new wage contract replaced the National Employees Wage Agreement, which had been in force for decades, with the significantly lower Public Service Wage Agreement, and resulted in deteriorating economic conditions for the workers. The small wage increases, which did not outweigh the price increases and cuts in other sectors, were further undermined by the abolition of vacation allowance and the Christmas bonus.

Today, the average incomes of Charité employees are about 14 percent lower than those paid in comparable hospitals in Berlin. There are further differences in income of up to 20 percent between employees from western and eastern Germany.

The wages for new hires are so low that qualified skilled workers are reluctant to apply for jobs. Permanent understaffing and an increase in overtime put additional pressure on workers and make their work very difficult.

As in all major labour disputes in past years, ver.di is once again trying to pacify workers with a strike they have no intention of prosecuting, only to stab them in the back at the decisive moment and organise a sell-out. The employers know this, as does the SPD-Left Party Senate, which is encouraged by the spinelessness of the union to carry out ever more provocative attacks. For example, shortly before the strike began, Berlin's Governing Mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD) arrogantly declared that hospital workers demanding higher wages would be to blame if the Charité were to go bankrupt.

Official wage negotiations have taken place since November 2010 with the SPD-Left Party Senate making it clear from the beginning that it would not yield to any demands. Nevertheless, ver.di has waited until now to call a strike.

On Monday, in fact, only 2,000 of the approximately 10,000 non-medical employees were actually mobilised by the union to take part in active strike action, allowing management to maintain the majority of hospital beds. According to an emergency service agreement between ver.di and the Charité, a further expansion of the walkout would have to be announced several days in advance and hospital staff already anticipate that the union will seek to close down the strike by the end of the week.

Only a few days after the strike vote at the Charité, ver.di ended wage negotiations for the 17,000 non-medical employees of the Helios hospital chain, which were being conducted at the same time. The union signed a wage agreement that will effectively mean a decrease in actual wages. Additionally, ver.di is systematically driving a wedge between non-medical and medical employees by claiming that doctors had enriched themselves at the expense of other groups of employees.

The fact that doctors are represented by their own union, the Marburger Bund, and are conducting separate wage negotiations says a great deal about ver.di. The Marburger Bund (Marburg Alliance) saw itself forced to withdraw from ver.di in September 2005 because doctors were no longer willing to submit to ver.di's wage dictates. The doctors'

demands were completely justified, but ver.di was not prepared to raise similar demands for its own members. Ver.di was particularly outraged that the doctors dared to denounce openly the well-established argument that it was not possible to win more favourable agreements because there was no money.

In this respect, the doctors were the vanguard of a broader social change. The anger and outrage about the catastrophic social crisis, which has developed below the surface for years, is now breaking out more and more openly. Increasingly, workers realise that following the giveaway of billions to the banks and the obligation to decrease new public debt—embodied in the German “debt brake”—they can expect no improvement in their conditions of living “from above”. The unions are less and less able to channel this growing protest.

For ver.di this strike is a necessary evil to enable workers to vent some of their anger, and thereby prevent an uncontrolled explosion. The union did not call for a strike to enforce the interests of workers, but rather from the start to block a serious struggle for these interests. It wants to avoid an independent movement of the workers at all costs, because such a movement would quickly turn against the profit system in general, i.e., the basis for all of the union’s privileges and activities.

In this respect, ver.di is supported by some pseudo-left organisations who are trying to subordinate any resistance to the anti-working class policies of SPD and the Left Party by encouraging illusions in the ability of these same parties to reform themselves.

In the case of the Charité, this role is played by the Socialist Alternative (Sozialistische Alternative, SAV), and SAV member, Carsten Becker, who is chairman of the Charité’s joint workers’ council. When Becker spoke to workers from the Charité site in Berlin-Mitte as a member of the ver.di strike leadership on Monday at the beginning of the strike, he avoided any criticism of the SPD and Left Party, as well as any other political questions.

Becker’s comments were accompanied by an SAV leaflet that had the nerve to tell employees that after almost 10 years of continuous attacks by the Berlin Senate they would only need to exert a little more pressure to make the Senate change its mind. The leaflet stated, “Your struggle will be successful if you manage to exert pressure not only on management, but also on the Senate”. The present, the leaflet suggested, shortly before elections, “is a good time to increase pressure. This is especially true for the Left Party, many of whose rank and file members are sympathetic to your demands”.

The SAV’s tactics are to enter bankrupt bureaucratic apparatuses such as the Left Party and ver.di to provide these organisations with some “left” credibility. In fact, the SAV is covering for the right-wing policies of these organisations, from which the workers have to break in order to defend their interests.

The unions are also organically incapable of defending the interests of workers, because the officials’ own posts are bound

up with company profitability. Ver.di is pledged to defend the business competitiveness principle that lies at the heart of Germany’s corporatist labour policy. The unions regard their task as consisting of securing the profitability of “their” companies. Even the current demand for a wage increase of €300 is seen from the perspective of competitiveness.

Thus, the leader of the ver.di negotiators, Bettina Weitermann, stated last month in a ver.di press statement, “Currently Charité employees earn 14 percent less than their colleagues in other comparable hospitals. If this gap is not closed quickly, employers risk an emigration of skilled workers”.

It is time to draw some lessons about the unions and their strategy and turn to a new perspective. Instead of begging for the crumbs falling from the employers’ table—something that has become second nature to the unions—-independent workers’ committees should be established to fight uncompromisingly for the workers’ interests. Control over the strike should be taken out of ver.di’s hands, and taken over by the workers themselves. The aim must be the restoration of decent working conditions in all hospitals and decent health care for the city’s population. Such a committee should become the starting point for a political offensive against the SPD-Left Party-led Senate.

Such a struggle would be supported by wide layers of the population and workers from other sectors, and become a signal not just for Berlin, but for Germany as a whole and beyond. To lead this struggle, workers have to turn towards an international socialist perspective and build their own political organisation that places the interests of society before business profits.

The Socialist Equality Party of Germany—the German section of the Fourth International—has fought for such a perspective for decades. We urge all participants in today’s demonstration to discuss these questions and contact us.



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