

Unions sabotage strike at Berlin's Charité hospital

Lucas Adler
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Just four days after initiating an open-ended strike at Berlin's University Hospital Charité, the trade unions have suspended the strike and sent non-medical staff back to work.

The two unions—Verdi (United Service Union) and DBB (Civil Servants Union)—announced on Friday that they had received a “substantially improved” offer from the employers and so were suspending the strike and opening a new round of negotiations.

The unions had launched the strike with a demand for a €300 pay raise, improved working conditions and the aligning of salaries between employees working in eastern and western Germany.

In face of the massive cutbacks experienced in the health sector in recent years, even that was a drop in the ocean. Strikers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* emphasised that they were opposed to subordinating the socially important work they do to the drive for profits.

For nearly a decade, the employees at this state-owned enterprise have faced attacks on their working conditions implemented by the Social Democratic Party-Left Party Senate (Berlin city legislature). The unions have served as a reliable tool in implementing the attacks. This has involved not just cost savings at the expense of the workforce, but also a massive curtailment of health care. Under present conditions, reasonable health care can no longer be ensured in Berlin.

The employers increased their offer during the strike: from a gradual pay increase up to 2017, to an immediate pay increase of €120 plus further increases until 2016. The unions had originally rejected these offers over the past few days as being “not worth negotiating”. The current offer, which has been used as a pretext for breaking off the strike, provides for a pay

increase of €200 in two steps by July 2012, and the general adjustment of pay levels to those in the national TVöD (Public Service Contract) by 2014.

The ending of the strike is a sharp attack on the strikers. Verdi and DBB are sabotaging the dispute at Charité just at the moment when it is beginning to have an effect. The financial losses for Charité are running at about €500,000 per day of strike. There is broad support for the strike in the general population and staff at other hospitals have begun to show solidarity with their colleagues at the struck hospital. Nevertheless, or perhaps it would be better to say for that very reason the unions have decided to suspend the strike.

For Verdi and DBB it was never a question of ensuring the dispute at Charité hospital lead to success. They called the strike in order that the workers could let off steam, not to help them carry forward their struggle, but to defuse it. The anger of the workforce is in no small part also directed against the unions themselves, which have for years aided the attacks of the SPD-Left Party Senate and suppressed all protests against it. In 2006, using the same tactic that Verdi is now employing, the union first reacted to workers’ pressure by calling a half-hearted strike and then betrayed the struggle by signing up to a worse contract than had existed before.

From the beginning, the unions’ approach to the current strike was also aimed at a speedy sell-out. First, they conducted months of negotiations, although the employers hardly moved. Then they called out on strike just 2,000 of the 10,000 workforce. On the second day of the strike they organized a “central strike rally”, to which they mobilised only 2,500 workers. And on the third day of the strike they had already begun negotiating again with the employers. On the first day of the strike, the board of Charité had already

established that the strike would be over by the end of the week.

The attitude of the unions is not surprising, as their whole perspective is based on the logic of the profit system, against which the strike had been directed. They always viewed the demand for a €300 pay increase from the perspective of competitiveness, i.e., to prevent specialist staff seeking better paid jobs elsewhere. At the rally on Tuesday, the unions emphasised the competitiveness of Charité and sought a commitment on competition between the länder (federal states). In doing so, they are teaming up with the SPD-Left Party Senate, which uses the exact same arguments in pushing through attacks on wages and working conditions as being a “necessity”.

The strike at Charité must not be sold out by the bureaucracy. Often, strikers have accepted grudgingly that at the critical moment they were stabbed in the back by the unions and forced into worse working conditions. There must be an end to this once and for all. The unions cannot be allowed to simply send strikers back to their jobs.

What gives Verdi the right to suspend the strike? The strike was originally called after an overwhelming vote in favour. Where and when have the strikers themselves agreed to end their strike? The strikers should reject this undemocratic action by the unions and throw out the strike committee. It is necessary for workers to take the strike into their own hands and to organise themselves independently of Verdi and DBB.

This raises wider social tasks that cannot be easily resolved within the framework of an industrial dispute at the Charité hospital. Jobs, decent working conditions, wages and other social gains and rights can only be defended if society is completely reorganised, placing the needs of the population above the profit interests of the banks and corporations.

This requires the building of a new political party that will uncompromisingly fight for the interests of working people, unifying workers internationally, and which is based on a socialist perspective. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the Fourth International, calls on all strikers to carefully consider these issues and contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Public Meeting

“What next for the strike at Charité?”

Tuesday, May 10, 2011, 7 p.m.

Berliner Stadmission

Lehrter Strasse 68

10557 Berlin



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wsws.org/contact