Union betrays Berlin hospital workers' strike

Lucas Adler
12 May 2011

The most important lesson of last week's abortive strike at Berlin's Charité university hospital, called off after four days, is that the trade unions are organically incapable of defending worker's interests.

The hospital unions consider it their mission to ensure "their" respective management's competitiveness by acting as co-managers. Thus they try to strangle any form of protest against attacks on employees and render such protest utterly harmless. In preparation for the conflicts that lie ahead, workers must break out of the unions' control and establish their own independent committees to defend their interests.

Last Friday, May 6, ver.di (Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft United Services Union) ended the indefinite strike of approximately 10,000 non-medical employees at the university hospital, and sent employees back to work. From the beginning, the only purpose of this strike was to allow workers at the hospital to let off steam and thereby prevent an uncontrolled outburst of anger and outrage at the continuing deterioration of their working conditions.

By calling off the strike, ver.di intentionally isolated the approximately 2,500 employees of Charité subsidiary CFM (Charité Facility Management), who remain on strike. CFM's employees joined the other Charité employees on strike to protest against their miserable working conditions and low wages. Many of them have no wage agreement and earn just € 5.50 an hour. CFM was founded in early 2006 to outsource Charité's materials and supply departments, as well as its building and technology department.

Charité hospital, i.e. the state of Berlin, still owns 51 percent of CFM, which is thus politically operated by Berlin's Social Democratic (SDP)-Left Party Senate.

The same ver.di officials who sabotaged the strike by nursing personnel and thus isolated the walkout at CFM, are now calling for solidarity with the CFM employees' strike. Such cynicism can hardly be topped.

In the past years, the Berlin Senate has been responsible for continually worsening the working conditions of all employees at Charité. For its part, ver.di has faithfully implemented these attacks against employees' interests, and has acted as a willing tool of the government in the workplace.

It is no accident that most leading ver.di union officials also belong to one of the governing parties in Berlin's city hall. The union-government collusion has resulted in a situation where decent health care is no longer available to the city's working class population. Strikers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* always stressed that their opposition was directed predominantly against the introduction of the profit principle into the health care sector.

A chronology of the union sell-out

Facing growing opposition and resistance among employees, ver.di organized a strike vote in mid-April, in which 93 percent voted for a strike. Many employees were obviously fed up with the continuous deterioration of their working conditions. Ver.di, however, was opposed to an open-ended strike and offered its close co-operation to management. Not only did the union agree to the usual emergency service, it also set up a so-called clearing post, with which ver.di maintained permanent contact with the hospital bosses. Ver.di also asked management not to provoke strikers unnecessarily and promised to end the strike after a few days.

Following this, management ordered Charité doctors, who were not involved in the action, not to hamper the strike, and avoid confrontations with the strikers at all cost.

On the third day of the strike, May 4, when its effect began to be really felt, ver.di approached management for talks. On the following day, hospital management presented a new offer: Staff were to receive a monthly wage increase of €150 [$US 214] from 1 July 2011, and another of €50 on 1 July 2012. After this, wages are to be adjusted gradually to the pay level of the TVöD (Public Service Contract), up to 31 December 2014 for the majority of employees, for others by 31 December 2015. This adjustment will not be oriented to the current TVöD pay scales, but on future pay levels.

This miserable offer was coupled with an ultimatum: If the strike continued "in the current and announced extent" and did not end soon, the hospital campus Benjamin Franklin would be threatened with closure. The campus Virchov Hospital would face similar consequence, employers stated.

Instead of responding by extending the strike, ver.di immediately offered to call it off, and only demanded an additional retroactive bonus of € 300 for the period between 1 January 2011 and 30 June 2011, to facilitate the sell-out.

On Friday, May 6, at 10 a.m., ver.di organized strike meetings at all three Charité sites at the same time and declared that workers would have to agree to the employer's offer prior to middayotherwise the Benjamin Franklin campus would be closed down, i.e., ver.di officials used the same ultimatum as

© World Socialist Web Site

management to blackmail employees.

At the strike meetings in Berlin Mitte and at the Virchov hospital, union officials intentionally fomented a climate of fear, indicating that any decision to continue the strike would also lead to closure of the facilities in Berlin Steglitz. At the same time, they threatened that a continuation of the strike would provoke a media smear campaign and thus the loss of public support. Finally they argued, if strikers did not accept this offer quickly, the employers might withdraw it, and workers would lose everything.

Despite the threats from ver.di against workers, the offer was broadly rejected by strikers. During the strike there were pronounced expressions of solidarity by Charité employees for CFM workers. However, any improvement for the latter was categorically rejected by the employers. Many strikers were adamant that there could be no end to the strike before a wage agreement was concluded for CFM's employees. But it was just this split between workforces which ver.di now encouraged at the mass meetings.

A Charité employee, who participated in one of the meetings, wrote in his blog: "The colleagues were outraged and helpless, very emotionally tense. There were more than a few tears, and not only from the local chairman of ver.di who savagely reprimanded workers from Charité and CFM. His big promise made at Tuesday's demonstration that the colleagues from CFM would not be left in the lurch proved to be very short-lived".

At the Charité Mitte campus, a vote was conducted at the conclusion of the meeting on ending the strike and re-entering negotiations immediately after the meeting. In fact, those attending the so-called "full assembly" were not directly called upon to vote on the offer. Instead strikers were sent back to work, and requested to arrive at a decisions on behalf of their respective departments before 12 noon. The decision of one department delivered shortly after noon was only very reluctantly announced by the union representatives. Then the union declared that a majority had voted to end the strike. Some employees, however, disputed the result.

A similar chain of events took place at the Virchov hospital. At the Benjamin Franklin campus strikers had already made it clear at their own meeting that they were adamantly opposed to ending the strike. Ver.di did not dare hold a formal vote as it did at other sites because of the overwhelming majority for continuing the strike at campus Benjamin Franklin.

Although this decision to continue the strike at Benjamin Franklin was already clear at 10 a.m., employees at the other locations were only informed after their own voting ended. Ver.di knew that the majority of those who voted for calling off the strike at Mitte and Virchow did so because they thought that they should not stab their colleagues at Benjamin Franklin in the back. Had they been informed earlier about the latter's consensus to continue the strike, the employer's and union's scare tactics would have failed immediately. However, the employees at campus Benjamin Franklin were told later that the strike had been ended because of the majority vote by the colleagues from the other three locations.

Ver.di itself had not made any information about its meetings public, and the media also did not report on them. A vague and general declaration on the ending of the strike published by ver.di on its web site, declared merely: "The employer made us a binding offer, which is worth negotiating and postponing the strike. A large portion of the workforce at the three facilities agreed with us".

On Monday, however, most of the strikers were unaware of what happened at the meetings at Friday. If they had participated in them or were told about the result by colleagues, they expressed their discontent and outrage about the tactics employed by ver.di to reporters of the *World Socialist Web Site*. However, many of them also stated that they were not surprised about the union's actions based on previous experiences with ver.di.

The reaction of a ver.di official to World Socialist Web Site supporters, who sought to inform strikers about the union's role with leaflets distributed at Virchov hospital on Monday, shows that the union had intentionally engaged in this policy of disinformation. The official ordered the reporters to leave the facility immediately or else she would call the security personnel.

Indeed, ver.di can look back at a long tradition of stabbing employees in the back. This can be explained attributed to its pro-capitalist perspective, guided by the logic of defending the competitiveness and profitability of individual locations. The union considers its task to be to give advice to the employers, and help them to gain an upper hand against their rivals in the capitalist market.

The isolation of CFM employees from their colleagues in the Charité pursued by ver.di plays a vital role in this regard. Ver.di wants to prevent a common struggle of nursing and care personnel and CFM employees; because low wages and bad working conditions play a vital part in the future plans for the Charité hospital. There are already proposals to privatize parts of the care personnel and administration and rely on low-wage contract staff. In other words, major conflicts lie ahead.

In light of these developments, hospital workers' interests can only be defended in a direct struggle against ver.di. Control of the current and future struggles must be taken out of the hands of the unions. The workers of Charité must build their own rank-and-file committees, in which democratic discussion and decisions are made on how to continue the struggle. We call upon all employees to make contact with the *WSWS* to prepare for taking this step.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site