

Socialist Alternative group defends union sell-out of German health worker strike

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The sellout of the strike at the Berlin University Hospital Charité by the union Verdi has met with outrage and rejection in the workforce. Verdi has since received support from the SAV (Socialist Alternative) group, an organisation that works within the German Left Party and is affiliated to the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI).

The Committee for a Workers' International and its satellites like the SAV specialise in ascribing a progressive role to even the most right-wing social-democratic organisations and the unions.

At the end of May, the SAV published an eight-page article in which it presented the new contract agreed at the Charité as a success, and vigorously defended the ending of the strike. At the same, the SAV attempted to justify its own role during the industrial action. Two leading officials at the hospital and members of the strike committee, Carsten Becker and Stephan Gummert, are involved with the SAV. Becker is a functionary, Gummert a sympathiser of the organisation.

During the strike and afterwards, the SAV played a key role in maintaining the control of the trade union bureaucracy, and in playing off the strikers at the three hospital sites against each other. The SAV has helped the Verdi leadership, the Charité management and the Berlin Senate (city government) to impose a new contract covering approximately 10,000 non-medical staff at the Charité that will operate for five years. During this time, industrial action is prohibited.

Moreover, through ending the strike, staff that was already outsourced to Charité Facility Management (CFM) has been isolated and their low wages locked in place.

CFM was set up a few years ago specifically to outsource non-medical and nursing services such as catering, cleaning and logistics. CFM staff is paid far less, and the company is 49 percent privately owned. The exceptionally long duration of the new contract is part of other privatisation plans covering sections of the administration and nursing staff. In these areas too, privatisation will bring about drastic wage cuts and increase the intensity of work.

While the SAV talk up the new contract and speak about a "real improvement" for employees, they are silent about the long duration of the contract and the planned continuation of

privatisation. This will mean that many workers will not benefit from a pay rise, but can expect lower wages and worsening working conditions.

As chair of the Charité Staff Council, Carsten Becker and the SAV are well informed about the planned further privatisation. But they uphold the confidentiality clause agreed between Verdi, the Charité management and the Senate, making the SAV part of a real conspiracy against the Charité workers.

In a long article defending Verdi, SAV federal spokesman Sascha Stanicic sounds like a rightwing union bureaucrat. He rails against "ultra-left sectarians" and "know-alls" whom he accuses of "betraying and sabotaging" Verdi and "stabbing the CFM strikers in the back".

He expresses particular anger about an article on the WSWs, which some Charité workers had put up on notice boards and sent through the internal mail. Stanicic writes that the PSG [Socialist Equality Party] has really stolen the show, claiming in all seriousness that the unions at the Charité were intentionally sabotaging the strike.

Given the outrage of many Charité workers with Verdi, which called off the strike after four days, when it was just beginning to bite, Stanicic himself is forced to make a few critical remarks about the trade unions. He writes that in the "first week of the strike", Verdi had already refused to "conduct a wide campaign of solidarity in other workplaces and among the public". He adds that this was an expression of the character of the bureaucracy, "which did not want to conduct the strike as a political struggle against the Senate and wants it be limited to the industrial level".

But the SAV also shares the same opinion. They, too, were and are not ready to conduct a political struggle against the Senate. In fact, they are part of the ruling party—the Left Party, which is part of the Senate. Therefore in this dispute, just like Verdi, they stand on the side of the Senate and thus on the side of the Charité management against the workers.

In his article, Stanicic tries to kick up as much dust as possible to cover over this fundamental question. He writes, "Of course, it is true that in recent years the Verdi bureaucracy has not fought against worsening conditions, and that it has an interest in keeping strikes under its control, and also is concerned that major successes could awaken the appetite in

other companies to engage in the struggle and also to demand more. It is also true that the political proximity of the Verdi bureaucracy to the SPD [Social Democratic Party] and the Left Party, especially in Berlin which is ruled by these parties, increases their willingness to compromise”.

Leaving aside for the moment the euphemistic formulation, Verdi has “not fought against worsening conditions”. The fact is that it is Verdi itself that has worked out and enforced the wage and welfare cuts. Moreover, every enterprise-level agreement that formalizes these cuts has been co-signed by the Staff Council chair and SAV member Carsten Becker.

More importantly, Stanicic criticises the union for its “political proximity” to the SPD and Left Party, both parties of government in the Berlin Senate. He describes this as a reason for their “willingness to compromise”.

But the SAV itself is not only close to the Left Party politically, it is a component of it! It is part of the government coalition and thus of the employers’ side in the strike. This is the reason the SAV defends the ending of the strike and the sell out by Verdi.

In recent years, Stanicic and two other leading SAV officials, Lucy Redler and Holger Dröge, have conducted a public campaign to be admitted into the Left Party. Initially they had been denied membership. For almost two years, they hammered on the door of the Left Party, begging to be let in. However, Klaus Ernst, then the Left Party deputy chair, blocked their way. It was only in the autumn last year that he relented and let them in.

The Charité strike now makes clear how the change of mind at Left Party headquarters should be understood. The SAV is being used as a pseudo-“left” fig leaf for the right-wing politics of the Left Party leadership.

In view of the international financial and economic crisis, the banks and employers’ associations are pushing for drastic cuts in social services and increased privatisation. All the establishment parties support this and therefore increasingly come into conflict with the general population. Their electoral base and membership is shrinking. Under these conditions, the Left Party offers itself as a reliable prop of the bourgeois order.

It is fully committed to capitalist private property, the market economy and the bourgeois state. It has used its time in the Berlin city government to make it clear that, with the unions, it is better able to enforce privatisation and cuts in social services than the other parties.

The SAV has taken on the task of covering up these right-wing politics with left phrases. Therefore Stanicic and other SAV officials claim the Left Party has a pluralistic character—that besides the right-wing leadership, there are also left, socialist tendencies that must be strengthened, they claim.

But this argument stands reality on its head. The SAV and other supposedly “left” tendencies inside the Left Party are not progressive or socialist. They base their politics not on the interests of the working class, but on the bureaucratic and

political manoeuvres of the trade union apparatus, with which they are moving in lockstep to the right.

The entry of Stanicic and Co. into the Left Party is a part of this right-wing turn. Prior to joining the Left Party, Stanicic was for many years chair of Young Socialists in Aachen and an SPD functionary. He then joined the WASG, the predecessor to the Left Party.

The Charité strike shows the result of these politics. Workers’ anger at the calling off of the strike was aimed directly against the SAV. When a left-wing website republished the WSWs article “Growing opposition to sell-out at the Berlin Charité”, several commentators spoke out and attacked the SAV.

“Unbelievable! The opportunism of the SAV is apparently limitless”, wrote one person. He complained that the SAV had first participated in strangling the Charité strike and isolating the strike of the CFM workers, and had then called for the formation of solidarity committees for the CFM colleagues.

Another noted that the SAV had supported the suspension of the strike, and concluded that it would not be long before it sought to present the rotten compromise as a “step forward in the class struggle”. Verdi functionaries who are also SAV members were also attacked vociferously at strike meetings.

In his article, Stanicic not only attacks the workforce and makes them responsible for the problems during the strike. The number of activists had been far too low, he writes. Therefore, the strike committee had been overloaded. At the same time, he calls for greater collaboration with the Verdi bureaucracy. One must work with the Verdi full-timers as far as possible and also “enter into compromises”, he writes.

Stanicic’s views are representative of that middle-class milieu that for decades has orbited the bureaucracy. For him, it is not workers who are the bearers of the struggle for socialism, but the bureaucracies that have long dominated the labour movement. The radicalisation of the working class and the declining influence of the bureaucracies fill him with horror.



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