

German private health provider threatens Sylt strikers with the sack

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Three months after workers walked out at the North Sea Clinic in Westerland on the German island of Sylt, management have threatened to impose redundancies and also to close down part of the facility.

Workers responsible for patient care, housekeeping and administration began their strike July 4, after clinic management ignored their efforts since January to obtain a new contract. The workers are calling for their pay and conditions to be brought into line with the national contract for public sector workers (TVöD).

On average, their pay is currently 15 percent lower than the TVöD rates. A nurse in Hamburg earns €2,130 gross (US\$2,773) a month, while a nurse on Sylt receives just €1,800 (US\$2,343) despite higher living costs on the island, located in the North Sea and known for its tourist resorts.

The North Sea Clinic belongs to the Asklepios corporation, one of the largest private providers in the German health sector. The corporation's position was strengthened in January 2011 by a series of laws introduced as part of so-called health reform, designed to increase the profitability of the medical sector through stronger market orientation, fiercer competition and lowering costs.

In the strike ballot, 97 percent of Verdi (United Services Union) members voted for industrial action. Asklepios management reacted to the determination of the workforce with extraordinary harshness. They recruited staff from their clinics in Hamburg and its environs to act as strikebreakers, sending them to Westerland with a €200-a-day bonus.

Despite Verdi's half-hearted verbal response to this provocation, the workers' readiness to fight remained unbroken. On the one hand, they were strengthened by the support they received from the local population, shown by the size of the demonstrations in Westerland.

On the other hand, the strikers also recalled the events at Damp on the Baltic coast, where the clinic operator Helios had to withdraw the sackings of 1,000 workers in the course of an industrial dispute following mass demonstrations.

The Asklepios management knows that agreeing to a contract at the North Sea Clinic would have major consequences. The company operates 116 medical facilities with nearly 45,000 employees in Germany, with an annual turnover of about €2.5 billion. Giving way at the North Sea Clinic would lead to a flood of demands at the other clinics.

In an effort to preclude this possibility, at the end of September, Asklepios offered the strikers a one-off payment of €2,500 (US\$3,255) instead of agreeing to a contract and a wage increase of 8 percent linked to the success of the business. The response of the unionised workers was unmistakable: 112 of the 118 balloted chose to continue the strike; some 65 percent of the non-unionised workers also rejected the offer.

Florian Nachtwey, the manager of the North Sea Clinic, reacted to the result of the ballot by presenting two scenarios if negotiations were to fail. "Either short-time working will be introduced from November.... Otherwise there will be a partial closure of the rehabilitation clinic in December". This would result in the loss of 98 jobs.

Instead of picking up the gauntlet thrown down by management, and responding with an intensification and extension of the struggle, the works council announced it could not negotiate on individual employment issues. Verdi representative Ursula Rummel appealed instead to the management, saying the works council did not have the power to conduct wage negotiations and that the clinic should recognise Verdi as the legitimate negotiating partner.

Both the works council and the union place their own turf war and interests above the aims of the strike, and have deliberately ignored the significance of the struggle, which extends far beyond the island of Sylt. The conflict at the North Sea Clinic represents just the tip of the iceberg, since the private health sector, which has subordinated wide parts of medical provision to the profit interests of a few large corporations, has exploded in the last years.

In 1991, 14.8 percent of German hospitals were operated privately; by 2010, this had reached 32.9 percent and rising. Since costs in the health care sector have risen from €90 to €300 billion in the last 15 years, corporations such as Asklepios, Rhön, Sana and Helios are doing everything they can to push down personnel costs, with the full support of the state.

The fact the strikers at the North Sea Clinic have successfully resisted Asklepios's provocations and tactic of attrition for three and a half months shows their determination and readiness to fight. During this time, the Verdi leadership has not lifted a finger to mobilise its members at other clinics to undertake solidarity action in support of the strikers, showing that union officials, despite claims to the contrary, are working just as systematically to stop the strike from spreading as Asklepios management.



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