

The role of Ver.di and the Left Party in the Berlin health workers strike

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The strike at the Berlin Charité, Europe's largest university hospital, raises fundamental political questions. As with the struggles of postal workers, childcare workers and train drivers, the struggle by caregivers at Charité is a confrontation not only against a ruthless management, but also against the Berlin senate and the entire German government.

However, the Ver.di trade union, together with the Left Party and the pseudo-left group SAV (Socialist Alternative), is working closely with the Berlin senate and other government authorities. The unbearable working conditions facing hospital staff, which has provoked justified opposition, are the product of years of drastic cost-cutting imposed by Charité management in close collaboration with the Berlin senate and with the support of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Left Party, Ver.di and its workplace group led by SAV.

Ver.di has repeatedly organised protest actions as a cover for its backroom deals with management and the government, while the union imposes further attacks on working conditions and cuts. Workers are growing increasingly hostile to the reactionary “social partnership” as shown by the significant losses Ver.di suffered during last year's staff council elections. Karsten Becker (of Ver.di and SAV) was voted out as chairman of the central staff council (GPR) and replaced by Christine Brandt (Marburger Bund, the doctors' trade union).

The Ver.di and SAV officials are exploiting anger over the miserable conditions to regain credibility during the current strike. Meanwhile, union officials want to prove to management that it should utilize the tried and trusted services of Ver.di to impose the coming social attacks.

The most important task for striking workers—and the precondition for mobilizing the widest support for their

strike—is drawing the political lessons of past struggles.

Continuous staff cuts have taken place for almost two decades, combined with ever-deeper spending cuts. An important milestone in this attack was the “reform” of state health insurance passed by the SPD-Green Party government in 2000. Ulla Schmidt, the SPD health minister at the time, was a member of the Maoist KBV in the 1970s, and relied on close collaboration with the trade unions to pass the law. Today, she sits on the Charité's management board.

The new law established a so-called results-based and generalised remuneration system. Under this scheme, payments to hospitals from the health insurance fund were no longer based on actual medical costs but a flat fee based on the diagnosis. The explicit goal was to compel hospitals to enter into a ruthless competition against each other to reduce patient stays and privatise services.

The coalition of the SPD and Left Party, initially PDS, in Berlin, launched these anti-social policies between 2002 and 2011. One of the first decisions of this “red-red alliance” was to announce the state of Berlin's immediate departure from the association of state employers in order to drastically cut public sector wages. By early 2003, Charité employees lost an average of €20 million annually. In addition, the senate slashed state funding for research and teaching by €98 million and demanded another €40 million in annual savings from workers.

At the initiative of the SPD-Left Party state government, non-medical personnel, such as caterers, cleaners and logistic staff had their jobs outsourced to Charité Facilities Management, a firm specially created for this purpose. This led to millions in cost cutting. Employees of CFM earn significantly lower wages and labour under worse conditions. Compared to workers

under the public service contract, they are paid around €700 a month less. The Charité, i.e. the state of Berlin, owns a 51 percent majority of CFM. The SPD, Left Party and Ver.di worked hand in glove to create the catastrophic conditions for CFM workers.

The division of workers between Charité and CFM encouraged a fratricidal competition between the workers. This bolstered Ver.di's effort to undermine a joint struggle of care personnel and other staff.

At the same time, the trade union covered for the senate's attacks on workers and created the framework for them to take place. Between 2004 and 2006, Ver.di conducted no less than 26 rounds of talks on a new contract. This farce proved useful for management, enabling them to maintain even lower wages.

In September 2006, in the face of widespread anger among workers, Ver.di was compelled to call a strike, but it deliberately confined the walkout to a few departments and shut it down after just eight days. The result was a six-year sell-out contract, which limited wage increases to 4.4 percent, well behind the rate of inflation.

Ver.di collaborated closely with the Left Party's Thomas Flierl who served as senator for science, research and culture in Berlin between 2002 and 2006, and the board chairman at Charité. His colleague in the senate and on the Charité board was the notorious finance senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD). Both worked out the spending cuts in Berlin and imposed them in the public sector and health care system.

In 2011, anger mounted among CFM employees. Ver.di called a strike and then largely handed the conduct of the struggle to the Left Party and SAV. These pseudo-left forces aided and abetted Ver.di in the systematic isolation and sell-out of 10,000 non-medical personnel. In the end, CFM employees were forced to accept a five-year contract with minimal pay increases as well as a no-strike pledge for the duration of the deal.

Predictably, the SAV portrayed the strike's defeat as an unmitigated victory. Stefan Gummert, a member of the joint work's council and a strike leader at the time, enthused over a "successful strike," whose "strike concept" had broken "with traditional trade union action in the hospital sector."

For the Left Party and SAV, the success was not measured by real wage increases or improvements for

workers—of which there were none—but Ver.di's success in suppressing the class struggle and preventing a direct political confrontation with the Berlin government. These forces are closely linked to the corrupt trade union milieu and subordinate every struggle by workers to this bureaucratic apparatus.

The glorification of Ver.di and other trade unions is reactionary through and through.

In the current crisis, the trade unions are playing an important role in defending the bourgeois order. They support the German government, which is building up the military and preparing for war in response to the crisis in Europe. The trade unions offer their services as a force for capitalist stability to suppress all serious resistance.

Charité workers should organise rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and their pseudo-left apologists. Strikers should reach out to childcare workers, postal workers, train drivers and other sections of workers to launch a joint struggle against the government and its policies of austerity and war. This should become the catalyst for the development of a mass political movement of the working class based on an internationalist and socialist programme.



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