

Striking Berlin hospital workers denounce austerity, staffing cuts

Our correspondents
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On the second day of the strike at Berlin's Charité Hospital, several hundred nurses and caregivers gathered at the Ministry of Health in the city's centre to reaffirm their demands for more personnel and an end to cutbacks. The walkout began on Monday at Europe's largest teaching hospital after a 96 percent vote in favour of a strike.

A large number of young care workers participated with many bringing hand-painted posters and banners. "Minimum personnel, maximum risk!", "Come in and burn out," "We want to get back to caring and not just surviving our jobs!", and similar slogans highlight the severe stress workers face after years of hospital cuts.

The demonstrations and rallies, however, only underscored the chasm between the demands of workers and the trade unions, which are tied to the very same political forces that are imposing these austerity measures. While there is great discontent among workers over the savage cost cutting by management and the Berlin senate, and a real willingness to fight, the ver.di union has limited the struggle to one group of workers in a single hospital. According to ver.di statements, 600 caregivers are participating out of a total 13,200 employees at the hospital.

Many hospital workers are aware that ver.di itself is largely responsible for the miserable working conditions. In recent years, the union has repeatedly organized protests and strikes to let off steam only to collaborate with management and the state senate to impose personnel cuts. Until recently, its employee representatives on the hospital's staff committee were led by the pseudo-left group Socialist Alternative (SAV), a group inside the Left Party that has been responsible, along with Social Democratic coalition partner in the Berlin senate, for carrying out austerity. SAV specializes in radical phrase-mongering and

fruitless protest stunts to cover up its collaboration with management.

Ver.di suffered a significant setback in the last staff committee elections when chair Carsten Becker, a member of the SAV, was voted out by hospital workers. In an effort to regain some credibility their speeches at Tuesday's rally were louder and had a more radical tone. Becker, who helped carry out cuts during his time as chair of the staff committee, bellowed, "We will strike until we have better conditions."

Adopting an especially radical posture was SAV member Lucy Redler, leader of the so-called "League for More Personnel in Hospitals." She argued that the strike had shaken the public health policies of the government and therefore was a political strike. In reality, ver.di is desperately attempting to prevent a political struggle against the government. The union has wound down numerous strikes in recent weeks and months by postal workers, daycare workers and others to prevent them coming together to form a larger movement against austerity, social inequality and war.

In a statement by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) distributed by members of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit at the demonstration on Tuesday, we wrote, "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."

World Socialist Web Site reporters discussed the statement with several participants at the

demonstration. Jonathan, a medical student at Charité, said, “I support the strike wholeheartedly. There are far too few caregivers employed in the hospital. Although I’m still a student in the teaching hospital we see the stress nurses are subjected to every day.”

Cuts to personnel and heavier workloads are also confronting postal workers and educators in daycare centers. “I definitely see a connection there,” said Jonathan, adding “that is capitalism. The goal is generating profit, not concern for the basic needs of the population.”

Jonathan is especially troubled by the growing threat of war and military build-up. “The crisis in Ukraine clearly shows what kind of danger we find ourselves in,” he said, explaining that a meeting was being held at Charité on the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. “This is not just about more carers,” he said, “it’s about a struggle against the system.”

Kerstin, 28, is a care specialist in the Charité’s surgical center who supports the strike but remains on the job for emergency surgeries. She said, “Things can’t continue as they are now. There’s not enough personnel and there’s more and more overtime. The pressure has kept increasing in the last year. I’ve even considered transferring to a private clinic that’s smaller and has a regular duty roster so I could better plan my free time, even though I might earn less money there.”

Kerstin was critical of ver.di for only calling a strike at the Charité Hospital instead of extending it to other workers facing the same problems. “I can’t believe this strike will be able to achieve its set goals because it’s so isolated.” As the mother of a small child, she is also confronted with the situation facing staff in daycare centers. “Some other parents and I recently sent a letter to the youth welfare office demanding more personnel for the daycares,” she explained. “While there are officially three carers assigned for 25 children, when one of them is out for further training and another is out sick, then the children are looked after by just one person doing a job that is already too much for two people. We have to wait until September for a discussion.”

Rolf, 69, is a former caregiver at the Charité Hospital’s Benjamin Franklin campus in Steglitz who travelled to Berlin to support the strike when it began on Monday. “In the 1980s, things were still pretty good,” he said, “then the workload kept increasing. We

had to take on more and more tasks that were previously handled by doctors. That meant a lot of overtime. The pressure was finally so great I got sick myself and couldn’t do my job anymore.”

Like many other workers, Rolf felt the union had abandoned him “because it didn’t oppose this increasing stress in the workplace, but instead made arrangements and compromises with the government that was our employer at the time. That only made our situation worse. That’s why I finally left the union too. We have to free ourselves from the domination of the trade unions.”

Two workers from the Charité Facility Management (CFM), which outsources cleaning, catering and logistical services, who also came to the demonstration didn’t want anything to do with the union. CFM workers were not called out on strike by ver.di, they reported. Both recalled how the union isolated and sold out their strike against poor working conditions and low wages in 2011. Because the government was imposing austerity everywhere, workers all over Germany had to be united “in order to achieve something,” one said.



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