

Ver.di ends strike at Berlin's Charité hospital

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The Ver.di trade union has called off a 10-day strike by nurses and care personnel for a new contract at Berlin's Charité university hospital. Normal service was resumed at the hospital on Friday with the early shift.

Ver.di had already agreed to a document containing key points with the clinic's management on Wednesday evening, which is to form the basis for a new "Healthcare and Demography" contract. Hardly any details are known so far. According to a press release from Ver.di, both sides have allegedly agreed "to establish regulations to reduce workloads in all areas." Minimum staffing levels are also being worked out, as well as better care arrangements in certain areas such as emergency room and children's wards.

The trade union is celebrating this agreement as a significant breakthrough, which supposedly demonstrates that Charité management has undertaken a "change in direction." This is a fraud. In fact, Ver.di broke off the strike precisely at the point where it was beginning to have an impact, without achieving any genuine gains. Only vague promises have been made regarding increasing staff numbers and reducing workloads—the main issues behind the strike. In emergency wards, for example, a patient to staff ratio of two to one is to be established. Such recommendations already exist, but in practice the ratio is sometimes as high as 12 to one.

Even Ver.di secretary Kalle Kunkel acknowledged that the number of staff to be hired as part of the agreement remains unresolved. He also dampened hopes that anything concrete would be agreed to in the foreseeable future. Weeks could go by without an agreement, Kunkel said.

At the same time, all of the promised improvements have been made conditional on the financial situation. "We don't yet know how we can finance the additional costs," said chairman of Charité's board Karl Max

Einhäupl.

Ver.di intends first of all to draft a timetable for negotiations and establish a health committee "to initiate measures on funding healthcare and age appropriate work," said Karsten Becker, head of Ver.di's workplace group. What care workers can expect can be gauged from the previous healthcare commission formed as a result of an arbitration ruling last June. It was supposed to supervise the hiring of 80 new workers by the end of 2014. However, this never took place.

The calling off of the strike and the initial agreement between Ver.di and the Charité management was celebrated loudest of all by the members of the Socialist Alternative (SAV) group in Ver.di and the "Alliance for more personnel at Charité hospital."

"The strike has been called off, but it is not over," wrote the supporters of the Left Party and the trade union bureaucracy. "However, it can already be said that the workers' struggle was a great success."

Only last Monday, trade union secretary Kunkel announced a further expansion of the strike, which would have resulted in the closure of further wards. As is now clear, this announcement was merely a hollow threat to compel management to agree to a declaration of intent and enable the strike to be called off. The trade union bureaucracy fears nothing more than a broadening of the strike, which could have grown into a wider movement in alliance with other layers of striking workers, such as postal employees.

The Charité strike had also begun to obtain support from other sections of workers in the healthcare system, patients and the general population. In spite of the agreement the previous day, 500 Charité employees took part in a demonstration alongside postal workers in front of the Bundestag on Thursday.

The father of a five-year-old, who had been treated in different wards at the hospital over two years for

leukemia, said that the pressure was palpable every day. “If someone is absent because of illness, there are only two care workers on the night shift responsible for 10 children on a transplant ward.” A delegation of doctors said that “with your strike you have shown what hospitals really should be about: namely the continuous improvement of working conditions to benefit the healthcare of the jointly cared for patients.”

Ver.di called the joint demonstration to quell and contain anger among many workers towards cost-cutting policies. But it was obvious that many workers are frustrated by the union’s tactic of isolated strikes by the various professional groups. There is a growing desire for a joint struggle against the increasingly unbearable austerity policies and work speed-ups, and thereby also against the government.

However, this is precisely what Ver.di wants to prevent. Already at the beginning of the Charité strike, the WSWs warned, “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, is working closely with the Berlin senate and other government authorities.” (see: The role of Ver.di and the Left Party in the Berlin health workers strike)

A successful struggle against the unbearable working conditions and cuts to healthcare personnel and other social services requires above all a political break with Ver.di and its defenders in SAV.



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