

Trade unions work to suppress German hospital strikes

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A wave of strikes and protests has taken place at several German hospitals in recent months. With some difficulty, the trade unions have succeeded in suppressing the justifiable anger over difficult working conditions and low wages.

The 1,600 employees of the AMEOS hospitals in Osnabrück and Hildesheim recently went on strike for 12 weeks. Under pressure from its workforce, the United Services Union (Verdi) cancelled their existing contract and entered into negotiations with the company for better pay and protections against dismissal. No agreement could be reached.

“One of the longest labour disputes in the health care industry in Lower Saxony” (*Osnabrücker Zeitung*) drew considerable attention. Among those participating in a rally at Osnabrück were leading representatives of the metalworkers’ union, IG Metall, and the Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG).

Also in attendance were members of the Volkswagen Works Council, as well as employee representatives from nearby businesses, including Councilman Frank Henning (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and Gisela Brandes-Steggewentz (The Left Party). They were clearly concerned that, due to the low level of organization among hospital personnel, Verdi could lose control of the strike.

The AMEOS hospitals, whose headquarters are in Switzerland, have frequently been accused of using a large number of temporary workers and outsourcing a significant portion of its workforce to subsidiary companies. The company employs around 12,000 workers in almost 50 facilities in German-speaking regions. AMEOS is majority owned by the investors Carlyle and Quadriga.

Verdi successfully limited strikes at hospitals in Osnabrück and Hildesheim. The union worked closely

with management, despite its ruthless positions. The strike actions lasted only a short time in each case. Last week, Verdi announced the workforce had accepted an agreement for the next three years.

The agreement stipulates that salaries over the next three years will be raised by 6.75 percent and the protection against dismissal will be extended to April 2019. In addition to this, 50 temporary workers are to be taken on by the company. AMEOS regional spokesperson Gerald Baehnisch explained: “We can live with the negotiation results.”

More than anywhere else, there was growing unrest at hospitals in Berlin. For months there were walkouts and protests at the Median Clinical Centre in the Kladow district, most recently at the beginning of August. Some 340 employees have called for a standard agreement with more pay and an end to often-severe wage gaps.

The company, majority owned by financial investors Waterland since 2014, currently operates 78 acute care hospitals and rehabilitation facilities in 48 locations throughout the country. According to their own statements, they are also on course to expand. In the future, they will incorporate the General Hospital Society AG (AHG). With this, another 45 facilities and some 2,500 employees would be added to a workforce already numbering 13,000.

The company strives to keep wages as low as possible. In individual agreements, professional groups like nursing specialists or well-trained functional service staff receive better pay, while auxiliary staff or custodial workers are paid very poorly.

Verdi is well acquainted with the practices of Median. Verdi Secretary Michael Dehmlow told *Junge Welt*, “Within just a single year, Median has reduced the percentage of workers covered by collective agreements from 70 percent to 7 percent.” Despite this,

Verdi works closely with company leaders and attempts to confine protests to a single location.

During a conflict with Helios, another large hospital operator, Verdi recently suppressed an already announced three-day strike in Bad Kissingen and Hammelburg. Five hundred fifty workers had planned to take part in the strike. But on Monday evening came the news that Helios had made a better offer, which had been accepted by the contract commission.

The main result: Over a three-year period, nonmedical personnel will receive a 7 percent increase: 2.5 percent retroactive to March 1 as well as 2.25 percent on February 1 and August 1, 2017, respectively.

At Berlin hospital operator Vivantes, Verdi has long played a similar game. This year, the union has already called several short protests and warning strikes in an effort to reduce tensions among workers. In doing so, the union leadership has been careful to ensure that different locations did not join together to fight for better working conditions and wages.

Verdi even made permanent the division of the workforce into separate professions. The union called a warning strike at the Vivantes subsidiary VSG in June. According to Verdi more than 250 VSG workers do not have a contract; they earn much less than workers with collective bargaining agreements. Among them are employees responsible for sterile materials preparations, patient escort services, facility management, construction, laundry services, and purchasing and logistics.

After two weeks and a few short, harmless rallies, Verdi declared there was “no sign of concessions” from management and ended the strike.

As a result, the state-owned hospital ended the fiscal year 2015 on a high note and in the black again. According to the *Berliner Morgenpost*, profits “increased compared with the previous two years: from 7.9 to 8.5 million euros. Another 16.9 million euros were accrued as a one-time special effect.” Revenue also increased from 1.03 to 1.09 billion euros.

In the suppression of strikes, Verdi has worked closely with the Left Party. Between July 11 and 15, members of the Left Party visited Vivantes hospitals in Berlin. By their own account, they travelled to facilities in Reinickendorf, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Spandau, Tempelhof-Schöneberg and Neukölln. They claimed

they wanted “to talk about their proposals for a solidarity-based health insurance system and higher quality care.”

In reality, the Left Party prepared the same kind of betrayal of the workers they had already carried out at the Charité hospital. At Europe’s largest university clinic, with approximately 14,000 employs, Verdi, with the help of pseudo-left groups like Socialist Alternative (SAV), which operates within the Left Party, formalized a contract that made permanent the miserable working conditions at the hospital. SAV celebrated the contract as a success and openly declared that they wanted to introduce it at Vivantes and other hospitals.



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