

“If we stop working, nothing will move here anymore!”

German nurses, carers, transport and delivery workers raise their voices

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“If all the truck drivers in Germany stopped working, there wouldn’t be anything left. Supermarket shelves would be empty, letters would no longer be delivered,” says truck driver Uwe Kleinsorge on *Spiegel Online*. He reports how, “I’m taking woodchips to a power station right now. Without me, the sawmill would at some point no longer be able to continue working, and the power station would also have to close down.” The consequences are clear, Kleinsorge emphasizes. “Everyone depends on our work.”

Erika Radisavljevic, 53, works as a cleaner in a hospital in southern Bavaria. “I have been cleaning in a hospital for four years, mainly the patients’ rooms, mostly in the gynaecology department,” she tells *Spiegel Online*, “for which I get eleven euros gross per hour. Most of us cleaning women have an immigration background and many have small children, so we need this part-time job.”

Sometimes the importance of their work is underestimated. Last week, she had voluntarily worked ten-hour extra shifts: “In the process, I disinfected the reception rooms of patients suspected of having coronavirus. When you hear the reports from Italy about how many hospital staff are infected, you can get anxious.”

The work is very strenuous and the harsh cleaning agents are harmful to health. “But someone has to do the work,” she says. “Clean rooms are a prerequisite for the virus and other germs to spread less.” Erika says she is pleased when now “many people and politicians applaud”, and adds, “On the other hand, applause alone cannot pay the rent.”

The coronavirus crisis is currently making it very clear who is really “systemically relevant” to social life—not the billionaires and super-rich, who have retreated to their luxury villas or ocean-going yachts, from there make their outrageous demands for higher returns—but the working class, which produces all of society’s wealth and maintains the vital public services needed on a daily basis.

A new self-confidence is currently emerging among workers. This is accompanied by growing criticism of the government, which unreservedly represents the interests of the rich, providing hundreds of billions of euros to the corporations, banks and capital owners, while at the same time doing nothing to change the disastrous conditions in hospitals, nursing homes and other important areas of work.

Anger is growing, especially among medical staff. It is well known to what extent the health system has been cut to the very bone, privatised and turned to increasing “shareholder value” over the last thirty years. Everywhere, there is a shortage of beds, staff, medical equipment and protective equipment. Staying in hospitals and nursing homes is now life-threatening for patients, doctors and nurses.

At *DocCheck*, a network for medical workers with more than 500,000 registered members, under the heading “I am worthy of protection,” health and nursing care worker Sarah F. from Hamburg demands her fellow health workers not accept instructions that safety standards are no longer being met. She criticises the decision of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) public health body to relax the quarantine obligation for medical staff. In future, quarantine would not necessarily be observed after unprotected contact with an infected patient, according to RKI.

The decision by Health Minister Jens Spahn (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) to relax the working hours regulations for hospital staff and to lift the lower staffing limit for certain wards has also met with massive criticism.

The same blog quotes Ulrike, an emergency room nurse: “Are we still citizens of this country at all? Or are we simply a resource that can be exploited, exhausted and used up?! We only find out days later whether patients tested positive or negative; whether we had contact, is difficult to say. We cannot remember all the names of the patients who come through the emergency room. Even if we do—the RKI and the politicians classify us as systemically relevant, different rules apply. ‘Work until you drop, and don’t take off your face mask’.”

She continues, “I am tired of denouncing the conditions and being described as negative. I am tired of the fact that the simplest rules of hygiene are not being observed because unqualified personnel have been retrained and ‘anyone can care’ has been propagated. Not everyone can do it! Professional carers must finally be listened to, we have been warning for years and now everyone is surprised with the force with which corona hits us.”

Andreas is a nurse. *DocCheck* quotes from his e-mail, “Our hospital has already had several positive cases. Two ventilated intensive care patients have already passed away this week. It is a frightening but real scenario that is catching up with us now.” He is very worried.

In the comments column, doctor Bodo Brudniok writes, “I call this exploitation of all nurses and doctors criminal. The undermining of all occupational health and safety laws is also criminal. Neglecting the employer’s duty to protect his employees is also criminal.”

Angrily he adds, “I also call the irresponsible politicians who have not prepared for this case criminal, and they are only trying to distract from their failure. For this, they are mercilessly walking over the corpses of the nurses and doctors who try to help and assist patients at the risk of their lives.”

“On the backs of those making the most effort,” the same politicians were trying to depict themselves as “great crisis managers.” This was a disgusting spectacle. Ever since the last pandemics, all those responsible had known about it. It was a crime that despite detailed pandemic plans, not even protective clothing, disinfectants and enough hospital beds had been provided.

Contributor Medman writes in another comment, “I think that after this crisis, it is time for doctors and nurses to stand up together. To stand up against laws that challenge our physical integrity, laws that force us to work without adequate protection.” Moreover, adequate remuneration for medical staff was urgently needed.

A paramedic from Chemnitz wrote to the WSWs, “Here is a short report from Saxony about my experience since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. Staff are not tested, this is only done in cases of symptoms and unprotected contact with confirmed covid infected persons. The whole thing is a vicious circle that works like this: Someone has all the symptoms, but can’t prove they’ve been in the risk area or had close contact with someone who tested positive, resulting in no testing, even in a hospital.”

But if the person was infected, his contacts cannot be tested, because the person of origin was not tested, etc. And yet the risk areas are already history, the virus is everywhere! “The next problem, someone is positive, we drive them to the hospital, we protect ourselves, but we still have to deal with smart cards, referral papers, transport documents, etc., which the patients partly hold in their hands, and paper cannot be disinfected!”

Extensive tests would finally have to be carried out so that what had happened here in the last few weeks would not be repeated. He continues, “Almost a complete village was infected by a physiotherapist and a waiter, several people have already died!”

An employee of the online supermarket Picnic reported to the WSWs about high workloads and lack of security since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. There was a lack of disinfectants and face masks, protective goggles and other equipment for the safety of suppliers at work and in vans, who were in daily contact with customers in risk groups.

Even the delivery vans with which several workers travel every day are not professionally cleaned and disinfected. The same applied to the forklift trucks at the respective company locations. Despite inadequate safety precautions and a lack of hygiene measures, the company continued to operate without restrictions.

Demands by employees for hazard pay have so far been rejected on the grounds that the company was only two years old and could not afford it, and the risks of the corona crisis were exaggerated.

Instead of spreading panic, the workers themselves should pay attention to safety and trust the company, which at some point will have a thank-you note ready.

Workers in the car industry are also concerned about the dangerous effects of the pandemic. VW workers discuss conditions for resuming work in an online forum where a joint statement by the works council and management creates unrest.

It opens with the usual pompous words about “health taking precedence over speed” when production is restarted, and that they support “the federal and state governments in their efforts against corona to the fullest extent.”

Then works council leader and IG Metall union bureaucrat Bernd Osterloh and personnel director Gunnar Kilian announce the gradual resumption of work immediately after Easter. “As far as the restart is concerned, it has so far been decided that from Tuesday after Easter, some parts of the component production will expand the already running partial operation in order to secure supplies to the Chinese plants.” This would affect employees at the components sites in Braunschweig, Kassel and Salzgitter as well as Chemnitz and Hanover.

Concerned employees ask, “Is there any information on how to proceed with colleagues who have previous illnesses?” Another writes, “I am, demonstrably, an asthmatic... I am on short-time work until 19.04. as a precaution. I don’t need or want corona.” A third says, “What do I do if I have a high-risk kid at home?”

A VW worker has linked to an n-tv article in which a colleague from Braunschweig reports that he has to continue working, which was becoming more and more difficult. “Meanwhile, you have to watch out for so much, so you don’t even know what’s right or wrong anymore. It’s not always possible to maintain a two-meter distance. Now we are told to come to work in our work clothes, so that there is no crowding in the washing machines. Maybe they’ll close them completely.”

In the coming days, the catastrophic situation in many hospitals and businesses will continue to worsen and the pressure to resume work under totally unsafe and irresponsible conditions will increase. Send information and reports to the WSWs so we can provide detailed reports to workers around the world.



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