

# Continuing wage dispute at the Berlin's Charité hospital

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A wage dispute at Charité Facility Management (CFM) in Berlin, Germany, which has been smoldering for years, has flared up in recent weeks. The employees of the subsidiary of Berlin's Charité hospital find themselves confronted by an alliance of the city's "red-red-green" coalition government (Left Party, Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens) and the Verdi Union.

Several strikes this year, the last occurring in August, were ended by the union without achieving tangible results. The CFM workers are demanding wage adjustments to match the wages paid in the parent company, as well as better working conditions.

Fourteen years ago, CFM was spun-off of Charité by the Berlin Senate—at that time a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party—to reduce employment costs and diminish working conditions. Although the 2016 red-red-green coalition agreement promised wage matching with other public servants, the monthly salary of CFM members remains up to €800 below that of their peers. Moreover, Charité has continued outsourcing non-medical staff, continuing the pernicious downward spiral.

Until 2018, Charité owned a 51 percent stake in CFM, which provides services such as cleaning, transport and catering for the hospital, the remaining 49 percent belonged to VDH Health Care Services GbR, owned by the companies Vamed, Dussmann and Hellmann. Charité bought back the 49 percent stake in 2019, giving it 100 percent control.

This buy-back was preceded by a long Senate and union campaign promising better pay and conditions. What in fact occurred confirmed the prediction of the WSW in March 2017, that the buy-back would "not improve the precarious working conditions of the 2800 employees," but rather, "establish low wages and diminished working conditions for the entire Charité."

In these 14 years there has been no lack of anger and willingness to fight on the part of CFM workers, protesting wages that all but preclude a decent life. The majority of Charité workers likewise demand re-incorporation of spin-offs and wage equalization. Yet over the years, the Verdi union has worked hand-in-glove with the Senate parties to implement austerity policies at the workers' expense.

The current wage dispute is no different. The Greens and the Left Party sent declarations of solidarity to striking CFM employees while at the same time strictly opposing wage equalization in the Senate. Verdi has secretly negotiated with the Senate for over four weeks.

At the beginning of October, the governing mayor Michael Müller (SPD) introduced conciliatory procedures, cynically affirming the necessity of an increase in income for CFM employees, only to immediately backtrack, saying any wage agreement must be brought into line with the company's profitability. This same argument was used to spin-off the CFM in 2006 and to justify the low wage regime ever since.

As reported by the Left Party-associated publication *Junge Welt*, the mediator requested by Verdi is none other than Gregor Gysi, the long-time head of the Left Party's predecessor, the PDS, and who acted as deputy mayor and Senator for Economics in Berlin in 2002. This would be the height of audacity and a threat to the employees of CFM and Charité. Gysi was one of the architects of the radical austerity policies that largely destroyed the capital's social infrastructure.

Gysi took on this office to "carry through hard cuts," as he told the *Tagesspiegel* at the time. He wished to make the city "more interesting for serious investors" and to make the administration "leaner, less bureaucratic and more transparent." Hardly was he in

office before the SPD and PDS passed a double budget for 2002/03 that far overshadowed the anti-social austerity measures the black-red (conservative Christian Democratic Union and SPD) coalition senate had implemented in the previous ten years, establishing the framework for the cuts at Charité and all other municipal hospitals.

For years, only a small number of employees have taken part in the toothless protests organized by Verdi. Often only a few dozen union bureaucrats and their pseudo-left-wing supporters showed up. The unions have cheated and lied to the workforce for too long.

The unions and establishment parties are far more concerned by the growing anger in the hospital workforce than by the toothless protests of Verdi. They fear broader, uncontrollable strikes threatening the capitalist system. The last years have seen an increase in strikes and protests against low wages and miserable working conditions. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated social tensions.

Just last week, nurses from Charité and Vivantes stopped work for several days in the course labor negotiations. Clinics in other German states also struck.

For 16 months now, employees of the Asklepios clinic in the city of Seesen have been on strike for better pay and better working conditions. The private clinic owner, known for poor working conditions, has long cooperated with Verdi to stifle the strikes. As the *taz* newspaper commented, “many employees appear willing, if necessary, to continue striking indefinitely.” An assembly of strikers recently declared itself unanimously in favor of continuing the labor dispute.

During the pandemic, strikes of nurses, doctors and hospital staff for occupational safety and better conditions have broken out internationally. In France, Spain and the US, among others, thousands have stopped work to demand better protections.

A successful struggle by CFM workers can only be waged independently of the unions. It depends on the establishment of independent action committees and requires an international and socialist perspective.



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