# Münster University Hospital: Nurse dismissed for criticizing workload

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Münster University Hospital (UKM) has fired a specialist nurse because he drew attention to the disastrous working conditions at the facility. At the end of last month, several UKM nurses, including the now terminated intensive care nurse, had demanded better working conditions and described their precarious situation on the WDR program *Lokalzeit Münsterland*.

In a letter, numerous UKM employees expressed "anger and disgust at the dismissal of one of our own." After public criticism, they had to witness "how a valued member of our group was put under massive pressure for more than a week and ultimately extraordinarily dismissed without notice," the letter says.

The employees also complain that their accusation of being overworked, formally submitted months ago, has been ignored by the hospital board. They had already criticized the untenable personnel situation in an open letter to the hospital management last November. The current duty roster is "dangerous for patients," they warned.

Since October 1, the University Hospital has no longer made use of temporary workers in nursing and due to this, the letter said, the work and stress situation had become acute. Despite the extreme stress caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the numerous serious cases in the intensive care units, staff members had been transferred to other units.

The employees further wrote that the hospital management's statement, guaranteeing that intensive care patients could be attended to safely, "does not reflect reality when one considers that every occupied intensive care bed must be attended to by overworked nurses."

Fifty-nine critical care nurses signed an injunction to prohibit the hospital from calling them on their own time for on-duty issues. They said they were no longer willing to compensate for absences "at the expense of their own rest and health."

The clinic management ignored the employees' accusations and in turn accused them of inflaming the issue of staff shortages. It justified the dismissal of the temporary workers by saying that the staffing ratio was still above the legal minimum.

The situation remained unchanged in the months that followed. The beds continued to be fully occupied with severe cases. Too few nursing staff and too many overtime hours remain the order of the day. The consequences for patients and employees are dramatic, as the WDR program portrayed. For example, patients are transferred out of the intensive care unit too early, and with one nurse for 13 patients, professional care cannot be assured.

The declared goal of the nursing staff was to mobilize more nursing staff through the WDR broadcast. This was to be the "starting shot" for the creation of a broader network and the enunciation of demands. This is exactly what the hospital seeks to prevent with this firing. It is intended to intimidate nursing staff and other employees so that they do not defend themselves against the disastrous conditions imposed upon them.

Asklepios Klinik St. Georg in Hamburg also recently terminated a nurse for alleged slander after she spoke to the *Hamburg Journal* about conditions in the hospital's intensive care units.

This makes clear that appalling working conditions in clinics are not the exception, but the rule. After three decades of worsening care and working conditions in hospitals due to dismantling, privatization and competition, the corona pandemic is bringing the situation to a head.

According to a study by the Techniker Krankenkasse

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health insurance fund, employees in the healthcare and social services sectors are particularly affected by coronavirus infections. While an average of just under 500 out of 100,000 employees were out sick due to COVID-19, the figure for outpatient and inpatient geriatric care workers was more than twice as high, at just over 1,200, as it also was for healthcare and nursing staff, at around 1,100 cases.

The effects of the pandemic, whose spread is fueled by the government's policy of economic reopening, are apparent in hospitals, where mass outbreaks are occurring and recurring despite, at times, stringent testing regimes. Staff, who have now been working under extreme conditions for over a year, are increasingly affected. If the policy of economic reopening continues, there is a real threat of significantly more hospital admissions and higher death rates.

The pandemic is highlighting the consequences of cuts in the healthcare system, which has been increasingly trimmed for profit. Nevertheless, politicians and industry are calling for further cuts. The financial crisis in many hospitals is playing into their hands.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many hospitals kept their beds free in order to be able to quickly treat COVID-19 patients. Hospitals were supposed to receive compensation payments for this, but these were not sufficient to keep them afloat financially. According to a recent survey by the German Hospital Association (DKG), monthly revenues have fallen by 1.8 billion euro, or 20 percent, compared to the same month last year.

"Politicians must take note of the dramatic financial situation of hospitals and recognize that the regular financing system does not work in this exceptional situation," demanded DKG President Dr. Gerald Gass. Forty percent of hospitals do not receive compensation payments because they do not meet the high requirements. Almost 70 percent of all clinics expect to make a loss this year.

This serves as an excuse to lay off clinic staff and cut beds in the midst of the pandemic, as in Bremen, which is governed by a coalition of Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Greens. At the Gesundheit Nord (Geno) hospital association, 440 full-time positions will be cut by the end of 2024. In addition, 250 hospital beds are to be rationalized away. These plans were drawn up by Bremen's health senator, Claudia Bernhard of the Left Party.

In the summer of 2019, the Bertelsmann Foundation called for the closure of every second hospital in Germany and suggested in a study that fewer than 600 of today's nearly 1,400 hospitals would survive. Last year, 21 hospitals were closed in Germany. From 2018 to 2019, 4,000 beds were lost.

At the same time, privatization is advancing. After more than 200 public and 173 non-profit hospitals were closed or sold from 2005 to 2019, the number of private facilities increased by 154 during the same period.

For example, the loss-making Catholic hospital Groß-Sand in Hamburg is now also being privatized. Observers are already assuming that the privatization will involve job cuts and further cost-cutting measures. While the hospital has to care for around 80,000 people, the health authorities are promoting the interests of the private operators and their investors. While the latter take the profits for themselves, the authorities have promised that generous flows of taxpayers' money will support investments.

Under these conditions, doctors, nurses and other health care workers are exposed to increasingly fierce attacks, as is now the case in Münster. To beat back these attacks, workers must organize independently and oppose the prevailing policies. All the cuts of the last decades must be reversed. Clinics and other health care facilities must be transformed into public property and no longer serve the greed of investors for profit, but the good of society.

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