

Strike at Vivantes clinic in Berlin: gulf widens between employees and Berlin Senate parties

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Hundreds of employees of subsidiaries of the Berlin hospital enterprise Vivantes renewed their strike on Friday, demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

Over the years the work pressure in Berlin's hospitals has reached unbearable levels. The strike rally clearly expressed workers' anger over these conditions. The participants repeatedly interrupted the speeches of the senate parties' representatives (Social Democrats (SPD), Left and Green Parties), critically heckling their attempts to appease them.

The Verdi trade union is calling these protests to provide an outlet for the workers' anger combativeness while at the same time defusing any initiative emanating from employees with pretty slogans and promises of labor-management negotiations.

Union secretary Ivo Garbe opened the rally with a reference to the negotiations between management, the works council and Verdi next Thursday. He demanded a clear commitment from the Berlin Senate to refinance the hospital if the cost of the wage increase could not be borne by the company.

"If we don't reach an agreement, a solution, then it looks like we will go on an indefinite strike," Garbe announced to cheers from the demonstrators, who thus underscored their willingness to fight.

Vivantes was founded in 2001 and is owned 100 percent by the State of Berlin, but is run according to private-sector principles, that is, profit-oriented. After the city's reunification, the Berlin Senate classified the state's health care system as "oversupplied" and in the years that followed closed hospitals and laid off more than 4,000 employees.

The senate of SPD and the Left Party (then called PDS) ensured that, starting in 2002, entire divisions were spun off as subsidiaries whose employees were no

longer paid according to the public sector pay scale. Affected areas included the food provision, laundry and other service work, including the rehabilitation of patients.

The employees of the subsidiaries are very familiar with the history of this "reorganization concept," which they have borne the weight of. In that collective restructuring agreement, called "TV Future", salary increases, Christmas bonuses and vacation pay were all taken away. In exchange, the company promised to forgo "compulsory redundancies."

When the chairman of the SPD parliamentary group in the Berlin House of Representatives, Raed Saleh, spoke at the rally, he was interrupted repeatedly by hecklers. Saleh told the strikers that he wanted to work together with them. He said the SPD would not allow them to be tread upon. "But that's just you've been doing all these years!" strikers shouted.

His claim that the SPD demands "equal pay for equal work" and wants the public sector collective bargaining agreement (TVöD) to apply to everyone was also met with the derisive interruption, "We've been waiting for that twelve years now!"

When Saleh then held up a pay slip and feigned indignation at the net monthly wage of 1226 euros, someone shouted, "It's your party's fault!" His terse response to the hecklers shows the cynical and hypocritical arrogance of the SPD, which wants to preserve the profit system at the expense of workers. "Stop complaining," he dismissively told the hecklers. "I'm on your side after all, man! We all have to pull together."

Saleh claimed he had not made a request to the management of Vivantes, rather "gave an order." If the company could not provide equal pay for equal work for private-sector reasons, then Vivantes would simply

have to be transformed from a GmbH (limited liability company) into an institution under public law. “Like the BVG,” he added.

The BVG is the Berlin transit union, and any bus driver could explain to the Vivantes workforce that the working conditions at this “institution under public law” are similarly miserable and do not guarantee a better wage level.

But then Saleh indicated what he actually meant by “equal pay”: the “gradual” raising of pay to the level of the civil service, which itself does not mean adequate remuneration for hard work.

Ivo Garbe put the cost of immediately raising pay to TVöD level at around 35 million euros a year, only to immediately express the union’s willingness to “draw up a phased plan for this,” which would introduce TVöD in full for all employees by the end of 2023—i.e., in two and a half years.

This ploy to make the strikers believe that the goal is to achieve the TVöD level, but in reality negotiates for small, incremental nominal wage increases, is intended to weaken the workforce’s resolve to fight.

The reality of the plans to “gradually” match pay scales is also shown by the Berlin Charité Hospital subsidiary CFM, where employees have gone on strike for the same goal. Tobias Schulze of the Left Party in the House of Representatives, who was present during this labor dispute, explained that after ten years of struggle, they had obtained a collective agreement that “points in the direction of TVöD.”

Saleh, Schulze and the representative of the Greens, Andreas Audretsch, used the rally only to advertise their parties’ election campaigns. On September 26, not only the Bundestag (federal parliament) but also the House of Representatives are up for election in the German capital. Their promises to personally negotiate a good solution will evaporate faster than the echoes from their speeches.

“All Senate parties are blaming each other for the miserable situation for us employees. No one wants to be responsible for that,” commented a striker from SVL Food Supply and Logistics to the WSWs.



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