

Support the strike at Berlin's hospitals! Build action committees!

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An indefinite strike began on Thursday at state-owned hospitals in the German capital of Berlin. Following a three-day “warning” strike last week, between 98 and 99 percent of union members at Europe’s largest university hospital, the Charité, and those employed in subsidiaries for cleaning, kitchen services and transport by the Vivantes concern voted in favour of an indefinite strike.

The strike deserves the support and solidarity of the entire working population for two reasons. Firstly, the strike is directed against the consequences of years of austerity and staff cuts, which have increased stress at work to an unbearable level. Secondly, the strikers are opposing the destruction of the city’s health care services, which are being cut to the bone in order to maximise profits.

The health workers union Verdi expects up to 2,000 workers to take part in the strike. The union’s negotiator, Meike Jäger, said there had been a significant increase in the number of workers willing to walk out during the warning strikes held in during the past few days. According to estimates, 1,500 of the 9,000 beds manned by Charité and Vivantes will be put out of action by the strike.

Verdi is negotiating a so-called relief contract agreement, which grants nursing staff binding compensation in the form of bonuses or time off for high workloads, such as those caused by understaffed shifts. At the same time, Verdi is calling for the salaries of employees of Vivantes’ subsidiaries to be brought into line with the contract agreement for public sector workers (TVÖD). Currently, the 2,500 employees of the Vivantes subsidiaries receive several hundred euros less than those employed directly by the company who do the same work.

However, the reasons for the industrial action lie much deeper. Nurses are carrying out vital work under inhuman working conditions and for miserable wages. The

COVID-19 pandemic was the straw that broke the camel’s back. It is now clear that extreme workloads and low pay are to become the norm.

Workers in the two state-owned hospital groups have related that they often work alone on a shift that would require two or three workers to provide good and safe care to patients. Even moderate estimates indicate there is a shortage of about 1,000 nurses at the state-owned clinics alone.

Similar experiences are being made by countless workers in other sectors of the economy: train drivers and conductors on the railways, parcel delivery drivers, warehouse workers and increasingly workers in large factories. Their health—and in the pandemic, their lives—are being sacrificed to ensure the flow of profits. Low wages, skyrocketing rents and rising prices are making life increasingly intolerable for masses of people.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), Left Party and Greens, which govern in a coalition in the Berlin Senate, are becoming increasingly nervous. On September 26, new elections will be held in Berlin for the Senate and for the federal parliament (Bundestag). These parties fear nothing more than an explosion of pent-up anger on the part of workers.

That is why the leading candidates of these parties have claimed to support the strikers—just as they did at the rally on September 3—but these are the very same parties and politicians who are responsible for the unbearable conditions and who are determined to make such conditions even worse after the election.

The transformation of Berlin’s hospitals into two large corporations owned by the state but operating according to the profit principle, the constant reduction of staff and the low wages that drive many nurses out of the profession are all the responsibility of the SPD, which has governed Berlin for the past 20 years, together with its coalition partners: the Left Party and Greens. The system

of flat-rate billing for hospital admissions, which serves as a lever for ever harsher austerity measures, was introduced at the beginning of the century by the SPD-Green coalition led by Gerhard Schröder.

Matthias Kollatz most clearly embodies the utter hypocrisy of the governing parties. This SPD politician is both finance senator and chairman of the supervisory board of Vivantes.

The trade union Verdi is playing a vile and dubious role in this dispute. An integral part of the network of personnel and politics connecting all three Senate parties, Verdi is trying to defuse the anger of strikers while at the same time doing everything it can to stifle the strike as quickly as possible. One can be sure that behind the scenes Verdi, the Senate and management are frantically seeking to divide the health workers and sell out the strike.

Verdi negotiator Meike Jäger announced Monday that she was ready for an “enforced strike”. It would be indefinite and would last until a result was achieved. At the same time, with an eye on the Senate and management, she promised that, despite the result of the strike ballot, the union was once again prepared to talk to the executives of the two hospital groups.

Initially, Verdi only called out Charité nursing staff on strike Thursday, while it continued to negotiate with Vivantes on Wednesday, apparently without success. In a press release Wednesday afternoon, Meike Jäger stressed, “We say quite clearly: we want to reach an amicable solution through negotiations and are always ready to talk. What is currently on the table at Charité and Vivantes are moves in the right direction.”

Shortly before the strike began, the two hospital groups had presented what Charité personnel manager Carla Eysel called a “detailed and attractive” offer. This is not, however, the relief contract demanded by the strikers, which would compensate nurses for overtime and high workloads. Instead, it is a kind of fixed service agreement at the expense of patients. According to this agreement, certain treatments are to be postponed in the event of a lack of nurses.

Nevertheless, Verdi negotiator Ivo Garbe described the offer as a “great success” that could be thrashed out with the employer when negotiations resumed.

The parliamentary party leader of the SPD, Raed Saleh, had already promised last week that the adjustment of wages to the TVÖD level at Vivantes subsidiaries would not fail to occur due to a lack of money. The SPD is evidently promising Vivantes fresh finances before the

election—a promise the new Senate is under no obligation to abide by.

The Berlin Senate, Verdi and the media will also try to put pressure on the strikers, citing the growing number of infected patients who are rapidly filling intensive care beds. On Tuesday, the seven-day rate in Berlin was 87.9, significantly higher than the previous day (82.5). Eighty COVID patients are currently receiving intensive care in hospitals. One week before, this figure stood at 50.

Responsibility for this increase lies squarely on the criminal policy of the Senate, which, despite the urgent warnings of scientists, continues to encourage unhindered contagion by keeping the schools and other nonessential workplaces open. In this respect, it can also count on the support of Verdi.

The striking clinic workers must not give in to this pressure. The struggle against intolerable working conditions coincides with the struggle for a health care system that serves the population and is committed to its protection and well-being, instead of providing massive payouts to a narrow layer of shareholders and hedge funds.

To wage this struggle, independent action committees must be built, so the workers themselves, and not Verdi officials, direct the fight. Verdi has been sabotaging any serious resistance for years. One example is the Charité service company CFM, where it has been blocking the struggle against low wages for 15 years via ineffective protests and empty promises.

New action committees must ensure that Verdi does not sign any agreement that does not meet the demands of the strikers. The committees must establish links with colleagues in other clinics and workplaces to organise a joint offensive, throughout the country and across national borders.

The Socialist Equality Party, which is contesting the Berlin and federal elections with its own electoral lists, and its sister Socialist Equality Parties around the world, will support all workers in this struggle.



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