

Berlin: For a mass mobilisation of care staff for an indefinite strike!

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Last Thursday, more than 2,000 workers began an indefinite strike at the hospitals in Berlin run by the Charité and Vivantes managements. A representative for Vivantes declared that 30 wards, three intensive care stations and a total of 1,000 beds would be closed this week as a result of the strike.

Since the start of the strike, workers have gathered at a series of picket lines, demonstrations and rallies. Last Thursday over 1,000 workers took part in a demonstration and march to the Berlin Administration of Health, and, on Friday hundreds gathered at the Virchow Clinic in the Wedding district.

Placards and banners held by the strikers reported on the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the hospitals. “We finally want to nurse again instead of just surviving our shift,” one read, and another read, “Nursing is on the verge of a heart attack.” Others directly named those responsible in the Berlin Senate for the catastrophic conditions. One read: “Kollatz, how much are people worth?” Matthias Kollatz is both head of the Vivantes supervisory board and the Social Democratic finance senator in the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Left Party-Green Party coalition that governs the Berlin Senate.

The hospital managements, backed by the Senate, are applying massive pressure to end the strike. Both have refused to sign an emergency service agreement to guarantee basic patient care, as is usually the case. Vivantes and Charité also declared an end to all official negotiations when the strike began. Despite this aggressive course, more workers are expected to join the strike in the coming days.

The effects of the strike are already being clearly felt in all areas of the clinics. Hundreds of treatments have been postponed or canceled, and the strike had a strong impact on the operating theatre schedule in hospitals.

The employees of the Vivantes subsidiaries for cleaning, transport, kitchen and other services also took

part in the strike. They are fighting for an alignment of their salaries with the main contract (the TVöD) agreed to for public sector workers. Currently, the 2,500 workers employed by subsidiary companies earn several hundred euros less than those employed directly by the company to do the same work.

Two workers from the logistics subsidiary spoke to WSWs at the demonstration in front of the Administration for Health.

Dirk explained, “We are fighting for the alignment of our wages to the TVöD of the parent company. We want the same pay for carrying out the same work. We were promised that we would be reintegrated years ago, but nothing has happened; the company promises are worthless.”

The nursing and public sector union Verdi deliberately limited the strike by calling upon subsidiary workers to strike for just two days, Thursday and Friday, a move that was met with incomprehension and rejection by both subsidiary workers and those employed directly.

In both the Charité and Vivantes hospitals nonmedical and nursing services have been outsourced in recent years in order to drastically reduce wage costs. As a result, staff are subject to increasingly precarious working conditions.

“We have a handful of people where I work who are still paid according to TVöD,” explained Dirk. In addition, there were many temporary workers who were paid very poorly, he said. “The workers of the Vivantes subsidiary VSG receive about 500 euros [per month] less than those who are employed by the parent company for doing the same work. When our department was privatised, only those who had been there for 10 years were allowed to receive the TVöD rate. All others were downgraded.”

The main issue for the nursing staff on strike at Charité and Vivantes is the need to improve what are currently catastrophic working conditions.

Michael, who works in the radiology department at Vivantes, described his very heavy workload. “There are situations where we have to pull bedridden patients from the bed to the table and back again on our own. Older colleagues have difficulty doing that alone or suffer back pain. For us, it’s all about relieving the load so we can work well.” Paperwork must be done after hours because there is no time during regular working hours. There is no extra pay for this work, Michael said.

Luisa and Anna-Lena confirmed the enormous pressure on staff, which is inevitably felt in turn by patients. Both are training to be midwives and are about to take their exams. They wish they had more time to care for patients. “We are just starting to look after the women on our own, and we already have an enormous workload, which contradicts everything we learned at school,” Luisa reported.

Anna-Lena noted that “students are already scheduled as full-time workers.” If a midwife is absent due to illness, for example, students have to do the work, even though they are often overwhelmed by what is involved. “Legally speaking, that is not correct, and it is also not fair to the patient,” the student adds.

The strikers agree that working conditions at the clinics, which have worsened further during the pandemic, are the product of a fundamentally wrong policy.

“Privatising the whole health care system and creating the current state by cutting costs—where else is that going to lead?” asked Dirk. According to Michael, privatisation was the biggest mistake that could have been made. “We are not a farm where you fatten the pigs so you can sell them off for a profit. Savings are always made at the expense of patients, ordinary people, to make a profit.”

Sofie, a nurse at the Charité Hospital who took part in a rally at the Virchow-Klinikum hospital in the Wedding district of Berlin on Friday, was of the same opinion: “The privatisation of hospitals is one problem, but so is the introduction of flat rates (paid by Germany’s insurance companies to the clinics) per admission. The capitalist system exerts pressure and increases competition. That is something that should certainly not apply to the public health system.”

The workers’ struggle for decent pay and adequate patient care enjoys broad support among other health care workers and the population at large. In contrast, the trade union Verdi is doing all it can to avoid expanding the strike. The union is working closely with the SPD, Left and Green parties in the Senate, who are themselves responsible for the plight of the clinics.

On Friday afternoon, Vivantes presented the union a new offer for subsidiary employees that can only be described as a provocation. Based on a term of three years for the contract, the proposed rate of pay remains basically unchanged from the offer made in August. The aim of the offer was to bring about a suspension of the strike on Monday.

In light of the huge discontent among the workforce, Verdi felt obliged to reject the new offer. At the same time, the union reaffirmed its willingness to negotiate. This was behind the plan to restrict the strike by Vivantes subsidiary workers to last Thursday and Friday.

At the same time, a conciliation procedure is to be discussed. According to press reports, this was decided on Friday morning when the Vivantes Hospital management met with politicians from the Senate to discuss the strike. Vivantes was ready for arbitration, a spokesperson told the rbb Fernsehen television station, and Verdi also reacted immediately to the proposal. Verdi spokesman Andreas Splanemann told rbb Fernsehen that the union was prepared to agree to arbitration. If proposals were made, the union would examine them.

These latest developments confirm that the union, in close cooperation with management and the Senate, is trying to end the strike as quickly as possible to prevent its spread. This is the role Verdi has been playing for many years.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) distributed leaflets calling for the strikers to set up action committees, functioning independently of the union, and take the strike into their own hands. Such committees should immediately establish links with health care and other workers around the world, for example, striking health care workers in Poland and train drivers in Germany.



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