

Verdi trade union calls off strike at Berlin's Charité hospital

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On 7 October, Germany's Verdi trade union ended the almost month-long strike by nursing staff at Europe's biggest university hospital, the Charité in Berlin.

A contract is due to be negotiated within five weeks based on a vaguely formulated document whose key points include a few cosmetic improvements for workers. In ending the strike, Verdi is deliberately sabotaging the ongoing strike by workers at the Vivantes hospital group.

The agreement was welcomed effusively by both the union and Charité management. Verdi negotiator Melanie Guba described the agreement as a "big step" and "milestone of relief" for Charité health workers. Verdi had demanded the establishment of minimum staffing regulations, less intense workloads and improved training conditions. These issues were "now being addressed based on this result," the union official said.

"This is the contract that now settles everything satisfactorily," declared Verdi representative Dana Lützkendorf at an appearance with the Charité management. Carla Eysel, Charité board member for personnel and nursing, was also "very pleased" with the result and referred to the ultimate contract as a "milestone."

The political parties that control the Berlin Senate (a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party) also expressed their pleasure at the end of the strike.

Franziska Giffey (SPD), whose party is largely to blame for the disastrous conditions in the city's state-owned hospitals, called the result a "very positive signal." Even Berlin's neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) had nothing but praise for the agreement.

In fact, the key points of the contract thus far revealed

make clear that it will neither lessen the overworking of nursing staff nor increase the quality of patient care.

According to the agreement, 700 additional nursing staff are to be hired over a period of three years. Even the 1,200 extra staff originally demanded by Verdi would have been insufficient to guarantee adequate care. Now this demand has been reduced by almost half and extended over a period of three years, during which the demands on nursing staff will certainly increase much further.

Moreover, the joint statement by Verdi and the Charité does not refer to full-time positions, but only employees. Currently, many employees have just part-time positions. And even if this provision were to be fulfilled over the extended period of time laid down in the agreement, it would amount to a mere drop in the ocean.

Another key point refers to so-called "stress points." For every five understaffed shifts that are worked, health care employees are to be awarded one point, which can be converted into eight hours of free time to compensate for the additional stress.

However, workers will receive a maximum of only five days off per year, and the measure is more likely to entrench permanent overworking rather than end it. When a nurse works double (to compensate for an absent colleague), he or she will receive less than two hours of free time in exchange. This means that understaffing will remain much more profitable than employing the prescribed number of nurses.

Given the reality of unbroken overwork, limiting the scheme to five days means it is unlikely to be used to any significant extent. Already, most nurses have a huge backlog of overtime that can hardly be reduced due to lack of staff.

Another point to be included in the contract is

staffing ratios. So far, staffing ratios of 1:1 for intensive care units, 1:10 for regular day duty and 1:17 for night duty have been mentioned. Whether these ratios will be reflected in the contract is questionable. On the other hand, it is already common practice to ignore agreed staffing ratios, sometimes for weeks.

Other points concern the use of trainees, the possibility of sabbatical years and changes to duty scheduling. No concrete information on these issues is available, and, as usual, the contract negotiations are taking place behind closed doors.

Workers should not be misled by the vague and totally insufficient promises of improvements. In 2016, Verdi hoodwinked Charité workers and agreed a deal on health protection and minimum staffing—again dubbed “historic” by the union. The deal ended a series of strikes and protests.

At the time, Verdi negotiator Meike Jäger, who is also deputy chairperson of the supervisory board of Vivantes and a member of the supervisory board of the private Rhön-Klinken, declared fulsomely: “At last we have succeeded in putting a stop to job cuts, especially in nursing, by limiting any further deterioration in minimum staffing levels with binding benchmarks.”

In fact, the agreement was not worth the paper it was written on. Since then, the situation has become increasingly dire, with nursing staff overwhelmed with extra work. Verdi was able to force staff at Europe’s largest university hospital to keep quiet for a short time with its vile manoeuvre, but the latest contract is to be valid for three years so as to make sure that further strikes will be illegal over that period of time.

Since the beginning of the strikes at the Charité and Vivantes clinics, Verdi has been working towards a quick agreement with management but has confronted enormous anger and militancy on the part of health workers. Now the union wants to use the end of the strike at Charité to weaken the industrial action of Vivantes workers and quickly close down their strike as well.

Vivantes nursing staff have been on strike since 9 September, demanding improved working conditions, while employees at the company’s subsidiaries are demanding better wages. The joint strike at the two big hospital groups in the German capital has demonstrated the power of workers and made clear they face the same problems. Last Tuesday, workers at the Asklepios

health clinics in Brandenburg also voted for an indefinite strike to secure wage raises.

The strike at Vivantes is continuing and more than 2,000 people, including many nurses, protested in Berlin on Saturday for more staff and better working conditions. The protesters marched from the Urban Clinic in Neukölln to Willy Brandt House, headquarters of the SPD.

Verdi representative Susanne Feldkötter cynically justified the ending of the strike at the Charité to the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* with the words: “One strike less means we have more strength for the other industrial action.” In reality, Verdi is now working flat out to sell out the Vivantes strike and ensure the perpetuation of the existing miserable working conditions and poor wages.

At Vivantes, no agreement has been reached to date due to the group’s unscrupulous management, which, even under conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, has made “offers” that would result in worse conditions for the workers.

Verdi announced plans to suspend the strike at the Vivantes subsidiaries on Thursday, arguing that contract negotiations would resume on that day. This agreement was reached under the auspices of former SPD state premier Matthias Platzeck. Verdi and the Berlin SPD chose Platzeck as moderator after he was appointed as mediator at Charité-Facility-Management (CFM) at the beginning of the year and was instrumental in pushing through a miserable agreement against workers there.

The threatened sell-out at the Charité and Vivantes clinics once again highlights the treacherous role of the trade unions. Health workers must build independent action committees which they control, rather than the highly paid Verdi functionaries. This is the only way to expand the struggle for decent wages and good working conditions.



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