

As Omicron spreads, German intensive care workers warn of already intolerable working conditions

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“We can’t wait any longer, we need relief in intensive care units now!” These are the opening words of the latest, angry letter from “Intensive Care Clinic Nurses” working in the city of Hamburg, Germany. In the letter, the intensive care nurses stated that by the end of the year they will work strictly to the parameters of their work contracts. Their central demand is that the care ratio of one nurse for every two patients should finally be enforced. “Instead of constant overload, we need guaranteed relief time.”

In their letter of December 14, the intensive care nurses point out that this is not the first time they have drafted such an urgent appeal. They had already drawn attention to their precarious working situation in August and October of this year.

The persistent overworking of staff leads to “many colleagues leaving intensive care clinic and situations arising again and again in which patients no longer receive adequate nursing care and are therefore at immense risk.” So far, the nurses have always stepped in in the event of absences, but it cannot go on like this. “If the board does not act, we have to protect ourselves: Why should we volunteer to take on more duties that are not planned for us in advance? Why should we continue to add to our own overworking?”

The incendiary letter from the intensive care nurses at a university clinic in Hamburg gives voice to the frustration and dissatisfaction widespread among nursing staff throughout the country. They are reacting to an intolerable situation affecting thousands of doctors and nurses which haunts them even in their sleep. They are in the front line fighting to save the lives of the sick in hospitals and intensive care units and experiencing death on a daily basis. After two years

of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are exhausted, drained and at the end of their tether.

The current situation, which surpasses the mass deaths of last winter, is expected to worsen with the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. For weeks, tens of thousands have been infected and several hundred coronavirus patients have died every day. In the last seven days, 2,600 COVID-19 deaths have been recorded in Germany. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 108,000 coronavirus patients have died an agonising death, many of them far too early and unnecessarily.

Bowing to the drive for profits on the part of big business and the banks, successive governments have refused to take the measures necessary. Along with a vaccination campaign, the closure of factories and schools and systematic contact tracing and isolation are crucial to bringing the pandemic under control. Olaf Scholz’s “traffic light” government (Social Democrats, Free Democrats and the Greens) is following in the footsteps of Angela Merkel’s grand coalition (Social Democrats and conservative parties) and refuses to introduce such measures.

On Sunday, December 19, the new government’s Council of Experts published a statement that takes into account the dangerous potential of the Omicron variant. It outlines the apocalyptic scenario that will result from the spread of Omicron in Germany. Because of the “comparatively large gap in vaccination,” a “very high level of sickness from Omicron” is to be expected, leading to a “new quality of pandemic.”

“Rapidly rising incidence rates pose high risks for critical infrastructure in Germany. This includes hospitals, police, fire brigade, rescue services,

telecommunications, electricity and water supply and corresponding logistic systems.”

Despite this, the government is determined to prevent the shutdown of the economy at all costs. “No, we will not have a lockdown here such as that in the Netherlands before Christmas,” the new Health Minister, Karl Lauterbach (SPD), declared Sunday.

While acknowledging the impending crisis, Lauterbach claimed that nothing could be done about it: “We have now passed a critical number of people infected with Omicron. Thus, this wave can no longer be completely stopped,” he said, once again placing all emphasis on the official vaccination campaign: “A very central message is that with a booster campaign we can actually protect those who would otherwise be particularly at risk.”

This claim by the minister is a deliberate lie. The argument that the booster campaign alone can provide sufficient protection is refuted by his own expert advisors, whose recommendations the Minister of Health is supposed to follow. The aforementioned statement it reads: “A massive expansion of the booster campaign can slow down the dynamics and thus reduce the spread (of the virus), **but not prevent it**. According to mathematical models, an overloading of the health system and critical infrastructure can only be contained by enforcing drastic contact reductions.” (emphasis added)

“Drastic contact reductions”—this is another term for the necessary lockdown of all non-essential businesses. Otherwise, Omicron will completely overwhelm the health system “due to the simultaneous, extreme volume of patients,” according to the experts.

Once again, the burden of the government’s callous disregard of its own experts will be borne by nurses and doctors and, by extension, the entire working class. Even more health care workers will reach their limits and be worked to the point of complete exhaustion.

There is no point, however, in appealing to government politicians, civil servants and managers who refuse to jeopardise the profits of corporations and banks. The trade union bureaucrats, who are closely linked to the government parties, are also sabotaging the necessary struggle. This is confirmed by the fact that in the midst of the pandemic, German public service unions, with Verdi to the fore, have concluded a collective agreement, which, taking inflation into

account, involves a real wage cut of five percent for nurses and other public employees.

Nurses can only improve their situation if they turn to the other sections of the working class and take up a joint struggle. This requires building independent rank-and-file committees that put lives before profits. The *World Socialist Web Site* has taken the initiative in establishing the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. It will publish reports from all affected sectors to illuminate the catastrophic impact of the pandemic and lay the groundwork for eliminating SARS-CoV-2 worldwide.



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