

Germany's health care workers' bonus—another insult to employees

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The current discussion in Germany about a bonus for health care workers is a revolting spectacle. While companies have been handed tens of billions since the start of the pandemic, those in the medical wards who have risked their lives and health every day for more than two years get only pittance. And only a small proportion of health sector employees get even that.

The incoming government, the “traffic light coalition” of Social Democrats (SPD, red), the liberal Free Democrats (FPD, yellow) and Green Party made €1 billion available for bonus payments to employees in the health care sector, compensation for carrying the burden of the coronavirus pandemic, with a tax exemption of up to €3,000.

Health Minister Karl Lauterbach (SPD) recently explained the details. The “care bonus” is to be received “primarily by caregivers who were particularly burdened during the Corona pandemic.” He added, “Only that way can the special service of nursing staff be really appreciated.”

In other words, the majority of care workers are to go away empty-handed from the health care bonus on the grounds that they did not perform a “special service” and were not “particularly burdened.”

Lauterbach went on to explain that the bonus should only be received by nursing staff who had taken some personal risk in caring for patients. Only by this restriction could the bonus be set at an appreciable amount. Lauterbach left open both who should receive the bonus and what constitutes an “appreciable amount.”

Lauterbach's statements immediately provoked sharp criticism from patient and nursing associations, as well as from representatives of other professional groups. Eugen Brysch, chairman of the German Patient Protection Foundation, said, “It would be a serious

mistake to pay the bonus only to staff who have cared for COVID-19 patients. That divides the workforce.”

Alexander Eichholtz, from the staff council at Berlin's Charité hospital, also told the *taz* newspaper that he is against paying the coronavirus bonus to only a certain section of the nursing staff. “We had areas that took on the burden of admitting extra patients to create capacity for the care of COVID patients,” Eichholtz said. “You can't say there were nursing staff members who did outstanding work and the others didn't,” he said. “Everybody got through this together.”

In fact, the so-called care bonus and the discussion about it show that, while delivering hollow phrases and empty promises, the government has nothing but contempt for those who have been paying the disastrous consequences of bad policies for two years.

It is the refusal of the traffic light coalition, and the grand coalition before that, to take measures to contain the pandemic, along with their active policy of mass infection, that has brought the entire health care system to the brink of collapse. Doctors, nurses and even cleaners and assistants in clinics and care facilities are completely overburdened with the flood of infected patients. Under the pressure of the pandemic, the effects of decades of cutbacks and profit squeezing in the health care sector are becoming apparent. Severe staff shortages and untenable working conditions define everyday life in clinics and care facilities.

In early December 2021, the BARMER nursing report published that the nursing shortage in Germany will be far worse than previously assumed. According to conservative estimates, there will be a shortage of more than 180,000 nursing staff in the next few years, because by then there will be more than 6 million people in need of care. It was previously assumed that

there would be closer to 5 million people in need of care. “Politicians must take countermeasures quickly, otherwise nursing care will remain major construction on a weak foundation,” says BARMER CEO Prof. Dr. Christoph Straub.

Likewise underpaid and hopelessly overworked are employees in doctors’ offices, facilities for the disabled and those in rescue and driving services. Not to mention the enormous risk they take. According to a WHO (World Health Organization) study last October, about 180,000 care workers worldwide had died of COVID-19 up to that point in the pandemic.

With the explosive spread of the Omicron variant, the situation threatens to worsen dramatically in the coming weeks. Without tough lockdown measures, which the government vehemently opposes, there will be an immense wave of new infections and deaths. In its latest statement, the federal government’s COVID-19 Expert Panel warned of the collapse of the health care system.

The fact that the government has offered just €1 billion as a “bonus” under these conditions—and now wants to give it to only some of the nursing staff—underscores the class nature of official policy. While there are supposedly few resources for those who save lives, the economic and financial elites receive billions.

At the beginning of the 2020 pandemic, the government earmarked €600 billion to support large corporations as part of the so-called Corona emergency package. Just days ago, Economics Minister Christian Lindner (FDP) promised further tax breaks for companies worth billions.

The previous federal government had already repeatedly thrown health care workers to the dogs. In mid-2020, it decided to pay out a “Corona-bonus” only to employees in elderly care. Lauterbach criticized this decision at the time. “Those affected rightly feel it is unfair that the care bonus does not reach nursing,” he said. In the end, not even all employees in geriatric care received the ridiculously small “bonus.”

Now Lauterbach is organizing a similar insult. If one would divide the government’s proposed bonus among the 1.7 million persons employed in health care, everyone would get the measly sum of around €590. Meanwhile, nursing staff have been working at their limit for two years to keep people alive.

What’s more, health care workers have seen a drop in real wages during the pandemic. The collective wage agreement negotiated by the public service sector trade unions at the end of last year, under which many employees in public hospitals are covered, stipulates wage increases that are less than inflation, currently running at 5 percent.

Even the most justified demands for improvements in miserable working conditions are sabotaged by the governments in alliance with the unions. Only recently the service sector union Verdi, together with the Berlin Senate parties, strangled the 50-day strike at the state hospitals of Charité and Vivantes and cemented in catastrophic working conditions and poor wages.

The employees in care and health care must draw the necessary political conclusions from the latest affront. To assert their interests they must organize themselves in rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the established parties. The task of rank-and-file committees is to network with employees from other companies and sectors, including internationally. This is the only way to wage the fight against the pandemic and for adequate pay and safe work.



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