

Nurses begin indefinite strike in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

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12 May 2022

For a week now, the strike by nursing staff at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has been spreading. The media, however, are doing their best to completely ignore the industrial action.

A strike ballot on May 1 resulted in an overwhelming majority of 98.3 percent in favour of an indefinite strike. On the first day of action, Wednesday, May 4, almost 2,000 nursing staff went on strike. Stoppages are taking place at the university hospitals in Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Essen, Cologne and Münster. Around 70 percent of all operating theatre capacity is at a standstill, all scheduled operations are postponed and entire wards are closed.

The strike enjoys the support of the public, which was evident at the rally in front of the Düsseldorf state parliament on Saturday, May 7. Non-striking health workers supported the approximately 2,500 demonstrating strikers, as did family members and passers-by.

A nurse from the Essen hospital central emergency room described her conditions from the podium: "We simply can't take any more. We come home physically and psychologically broken—this must finally come to an end." Some of the slogans being advanced were "Today is not a working day, today is a strike day," and "Trained, burnt out: We're taking up resistance."

In Aachen, the strike began even though the hospital management had not yet accepted the proposals for an emergency service agreement on Monday and instead tried forcing trainees to break the strike. Nursing students received personal mobile phone messages threatening that every day they were on strike would count as an absence, jeopardising their final exams.

The Aachen trainees, reinforced by those from other hospitals, then marched in a demonstration in front of the hospital administration, chanting: "The right to strike is there for everyone, and for us at UKA [University Hospital Aachen]." They demanded their constitutional right to strike. On Twitter, trainees pointed out their predicament as they are "constantly sent where there are holes to be filled."

At the centre of the strike is the acute nursing emergency, which is mainly due to a glaring shortage of staff. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, conditions for nurses were unbearable, and since then they have worsened drastically. The spread of the Omicron variant, which is wrongly described as "mild," is burdening hospitals with additional staff shortages and ensuring persistently high hospital admission rates. This gives the lie to the repeated claims of politicians and the media that the pandemic is over in hospitals.

Under the pressure of enormous rank-and-file discontent, service sector union Verdi had given the NRW state government an ultimatum in the spring that a "collective agreement providing relief" had to be in place by May 1, which would mandate minimum numbers for staff in the hospitals. When the state government in Düsseldorf let the ultimatum pass, Verdi felt compelled to initiate a strike ballot.

Yet the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-led government in Düsseldorf had already declared itself ready to introduce such a "Relief Contract," and State Health Minister Karl-Josef Laumann (CDU) spoke out in favour of this several times. But the state administration hid behind the fact that the *Tarifgemeinschaft der Länder* (State Employers Collective Bargaining Organisation) did not agree. The NRW state administration proposes to leave the body before the state elections are held next Sunday. Negotiations with Verdi on how to end the strike are to take place as early as Friday.

Neither the state executive in Düsseldorf nor the federal coalition government in Berlin are willing to improve the conditions of nursing staff. On the contrary, with the start of the Ukraine war in February, the Scholz government decided to take advantage of the new situation to massively rearm the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), providing it with an additional €100 billion, and to deliver heavy weapons to Ukraine.

The government is not only asking working people to "make sacrifices" and endure the hardships brought about

by sanctions, the boycott of Russian oil and gas supplies and the supply of armaments to be used against Russia, but also to support its war policy. “Fear must not paralyse us,” demanded Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a televised war speech last Sunday. At the same time, there is apparently not a cent left for improving the working conditions of nurses.

The trade unions, including Verdi, are needed to push through the government’s war course against the resistance of the working class. This became clear at the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) congress a few days ago when delegates enthusiastically cheered the speeches of Chancellor Scholz and Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. In their speeches, both Social Democratic Party (SPD) politicians justified the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler and called on the trade unions to support it.

The strike in NRW is part of the growing resistance of the entire working class. Thousands of kindergarten workers, educators and social workers are also taking to the streets in several federal states this week. Industrial workers are also ready to strike, fighting the wave of layoffs, cuts and growing pressure in factories brought on by sanctions and the energy boycott.

To take a step forward, health care workers—like all workers—must take their fate into their own hands. They must join together in Action Committees that act independently of Verdi and make contact with other workers. Like IG Metall and all trade unions, Verdi is closely linked to the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, which are intensifying the attacks on the workforce wherever they hold government responsibility.

The blatant grievances against which the nurses are striking are largely due to the policies of the last SPD-Green federal coalition. Some nurses, not wanting to be simply fobbed off with a coronavirus “bonus,” wrote on their placards: “The Diagnosis Related Group model must go!”

But it was the SPD-Green government under Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer that introduced the retrogressive Diagnosis Related Group (DRG) funding model and pushed ahead with the privatisation of hospitals. Politicians like Karl Lauterbach (SPD), now federal minister of health, were involved in this and today sit on the supervisory boards of large hospital groups such as Rhön-Kliniken.

Verdi is now concentrating all its demands on the “Relief Contract.” A similar agreement to regulate staffing on the wards was agreed after the nursing strike last November at the Berlin Charité and Vivantes hospital groups. Since then, hospital managements and the Berlin Senate (state executive) have been finding new loopholes to circumvent the Relief Contract. In Berlin, too, nursing staff have just

begun new warning strikes with their “Walk of Care,” because conditions on the wards have not improved.

The demand for a “Relief Contract” is also linked to the fact that Verdi is not making any wage demands despite rising inflation. Supposedly, nurses are only demanding “better conditions,” not more money. But it is hard to see why they of all people should bleed financially due to inflation with insufficient wages. After all, their salaries are also shrinking in the face of rising food and petrol prices, gas bills and rents.

In clinics and hospitals, salaries have been stagnating for years. A good 20 years ago, the salary of a registered nurse was much better than today, and many nurses only work part-time because of massive stress, which reduces their salaries even more. Ambulatory care workers are even worse off.

“It is not the strike, but the normal state of affairs that endangers patients,” a nurse told broadcaster WDR. Conditions were so devastating that reasonable, safe and reliable care for patients was no longer possible.

In the US, nurse RaDonda Vaught is currently facing sentencing for a medication error that tragically had fatal consequences. She had discovered the error herself but has now been convicted of criminally negligent homicide and impaired adult abuse at the behest of her employers. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the American sister party of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) in Germany, is the only political force defending this nurse.

The SEP’s statement says that Vaught is being made a scapegoat for the serious failures in the health system that were evident at hospitals across the country. “Because of short staffing and other deficiencies, medical errors, including dispensing the wrong medicine, are frequent,” it says. “To target nurses, who have dedicated themselves to saving lives, for errors produced by the health care system is an abomination.”

Resistance to such permanent overwork, poor pay and unacceptable, unhealthy working conditions is growing in the working class in every country. The SGP provides a political perspective to this struggle. It exposes the connection between the war course of the federal coalition government and the austerity measures in the public sector.

On May 24, the SGP will hold an online meeting under the slogan “No Third World War! Billions for health and jobs instead of armaments and war!”



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