

Health care workers in Cologne: “We are fighting for all of society”

Our reporters
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The nursing strike at university hospitals in Germany’s most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, has now entered its fifth week. More than 1,500 strikers and supporters came to Cologne for a central strike protest on Wednesday, June 1. The day-long protest expressed their determination to keep fighting until genuine changes are made to their intolerable working conditions.

The experiences of the past few years have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. In the coronavirus pandemic, the official policy of “profits before lives,” which had already caused a nursing crisis, has brought the health system in Germany close to collapse. Instead of responding to the crisis and relieving the burden on nursing staff, the federal and state governments have decided to invest €100 billion for the country’s armed forces.

In Cologne, nursing staff described the enormous pressure under which they have been working for the past two-and-a-half years.

Marie, who works as a night nurse in the oncology department of Aachen University Hospital, reported that she is expected to care for 32 patients. “Unfortunately, that is normal for us.” Rebecca from Cologne said, “In nursing, people work 10, 11 or 14 days in a row. For operations, the question is not ‘Is this necessary?’ but ‘Will this bring in money?’ People are discharged without being healthy. That is inhumane ... There should be much more money for nursing!”

Several wards at the University Hospital in Cologne are “understaffed and underpaid,” reported Jannis, a physiotherapist whose work involves visiting departments across the hospital. “Everyone is running around and working under intense pressure.” Kirsten, a specialist in an intensive care unit for 30 years, declared, “My colleagues have had enough. Some of them quit during the Corona pandemic. They had to work at the limit all the time; now they are gone.” Nurses were working “under a maximum workload,” said the nurse, a situation which bodes badly for the future.

On the day of the strike, the posters carried read: “Out of breath and rushing through the shift until nursing staff collapse,” “Come in and burn out” and “Please die slowly, we don’t have any time.”

“The way we are currently working is not fair to the patients

or us,” said nurse Maurizio. “This has been going on for many years, but Corona has once again made it clear to everyone. Now is the right moment to do something effective.”

Maurizio works on a gastroenterology (internal medicine) ward. He reported that often seniors from the old people’s homes are brought in a dehydrated and poor condition. This shows that the conditions in hospitals are just the tip of an iceberg. “It’s like an unending circle,” Maurizio said, “nursing homes are also overworked.” The pandemic, he said, has led to “many losses,” both professionally and personally. “We worked in a danger zone, had to limit our private contacts, and have additional workloads up to this day due to testing measures and cutbacks.”

Many of those in attendance at the protest declared that they are making a stand for all of society. After all, they said, anyone can get sick, and the strike is widely supported by the working population.

The media, however, are doing all they can to play down and minimise coverage of the strike, which has been going on for more than four weeks and has led to the closure of two-thirds of the operating theatres and massive cancellations at all six university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia—Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Essen, Cologne and Münster. Even so, there was only limited media coverage of the latest Cologne protest.

Despite the media attempts to play down the strike, more people than expected attended the protest in Cologne, including staff from outpatient departments, physiotherapy, massage, laboratory workers, day care, kitchen, transport, logistics and general service workers. Also in attendance were supporters of the strike who do not work at any of the university hospitals.

The nurse’s union, Verdi (Germany’s largest public services union) had evidently reckoned with fewer participants and the rally site had to be moved at short notice from one smaller square to the city’s larger Heumarkt. At the rally the most interesting contributions came from speakers who were not trade unionists. For their part the union functionaries concentrated on appeals for strikers to blow their whistles and repeat mind-numbing chants of “We want TV-E—for all of us in NRW.”

TV-E refers to a collective agreement which is at the centre of the demands raised by Verdi. Verdi union secretary Jan von

Hagen told WDR media on the day of the protest, “It’s not about money.”

This is despite the fact that everyone working in the health sector knows that declining wage levels are the main reason for understaffing, along with the increasing workload. To bring about any real relief, staff numbers would have to be at least doubled and wages raised immediately by at least 20 percent to compensate for inflation alone. These are the demands raised by the Socialist Equality Party in its appeal for the formation of independent action committees.

The leaflet declares, “Under today’s conditions, the entire collective agreement that Verdi is now negotiating is not worth the paper it’s written on. It only serves to suppress the anger of workers and continue the policy of cuts.” The union is deliberately isolating the nursing strike: it has made a firm commitment to the state government not to expand the strikes.

Its focus on the TV-E contract allows Verdi to divert attention from the wage cuts it helped enforce at clinics last year. At that time, the union negotiated a collective agreement for German states (TV-L) providing for a 2.8 percent wage increase but which only commences in December 2022! i.e., under conditions where inflation in Germany stands at 8 percent and rising.

The situation has angered strikers. In Cologne, Kirsten, an intensive care nurse, said. “The negotiations are not taking place as we wish. They always say they are negotiating, but they are not negotiating at all. They want us to stop striking, but that’s just not possible.”

Trainee Felix said, “Verdi is doing the negotiating, but keeping it low key.” Regarding inflation, he said last year’s wage settlement was “ridiculous and sad.” He also expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that spending on military rearmament was at the centre of the country’s political debate.

For Jannis, a physiotherapist from Cologne, the last wage settlement was “pretty perverse” in view of inflation. Verdi is keeping the wages issue out of the current strike. Jannis said, “We were taught in our studies that we should not sell ourselves short. That should always be a key starting point.” When the conversation turned to the €100 billion special funding for the German armed forces, Jannis laughed and said, “They’ve been saving money here for years. People are dying. And then (German chancellor) Scholz makes an issue of this in a speech and overnight it is decided.”

Miriam, a nurse, said of the special funding, “We were all very surprised that there is money for this (military rearmament), but not for us or for education.” This is an issue that concerns everyone, she feels. “Not only just health workers, all of society should be standing alongside us.”

“It simply cannot be,” said Kilian from Cologne University Hospital. “We are one of the richest countries in the world and yet conditions in the hospitals are so bad. That can’t be true. The German army get €100 billion, but nobody is interested in health care. Every one of us can get sick, can get cancer. We

demand proper health care, not just for patients but for us as well.”

Kilian took part in the strike day together with Laureen, and added, “We don’t want to be burnt out later in life.” The pair both treat seriously ill cancer patients: “We treat people who are dying. That’s also a psychological burden. We wish we had the time to do the job, but we just don’t.”

One placard read, “100 billion for the armed forces—zero for health care.” Ute, who runs the day-care centre at the University Hospital in Cologne, said she was really glad to see the placard. “How can it be? All this money is now available for the Bundeswehr, but for so many years there has been no money for health care?”

She was taking part in a strike for the first time in her life, Ute reported. “It cannot go on like this. You have to make a stand. That’s why I’m taking part here.” Unfortunately, she said, the workload had deteriorated enormously, and the job was in danger of degenerating completely into a form of assembly line work. Ute said that since the pandemic it had become increasingly clear that something had to change in society as a whole.

The Socialist Equality Party’s proposal that workers reject Verdi’s sole right to negotiate and instead set up their own independent action committees was also discussed in a lively fashion. Felix, the trainee, reported that news of the sell-out of social and educational service workers by Verdi gave the strikers food for thought.

He said, “On our first day of negotiations we heard that the union had reached an agreement. That was a bad sign for us.” Above all, Felix said, he was determined not to support war and the arms industry. He thought the proposal to set up independent action committees was important, and said, “In the health sector, to set up your own committee—I think that’s good. I’ll put that on my banner.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has widely reported, nurses in the US, Sri Lanka and many other countries have already organised themselves into independent action committees and workers at German university hospitals in NRW should join their international colleagues.

Get in touch with the SGP! It supports the establishment of independent action committees and helps establish contact with workers in other countries. Send a WhatsApp message to the following number: +491633378340 or register via the form.



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