Striking health care workers in Germany: “Privatization was a big mistake!”

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A 24-hour warning strike Tuesday at the University Hospital of Giessen and Marburg (UKGM) has once again exposed the disastrous working conditions in Germany’s nursing profession. And this is not their first strike. In recent weeks, both nursing staff and clinic employees have struck four times at UKGM, causing significant cancellation of treatments and operations.

In Germany’s first privatized university hospital, the more than 9,000 employees are not only fighting against staff shortages, overwork and poor pay, but also against the threat that entire departments will be outsourced to subsidiaries and subcontractors and that apprentice nurses at the hospitals will no longer be taken on as staff after their training.

The Asklepios group, which took over UKGM owner Rhön-Klinikum AG two years ago, is known for the rudest outsourcing and wage slashing at its clinics. The founder and main shareholder of Asklepios is multibillionaire Bernard Grosse Broermann, who in addition to other clinics, rehabilitation centers, etc., owns, among other real estate, a luxury hotel chain.

Rhön-Asklepios can rely on the cooperation of the state government in Hesse. In 2006, the government merged Justus Liebig University Hospital Giessen with Philipps University Hospital Marburg and then sold it to the Rhön Group. Since the takeover by Asklepios, the government has bound itself to participate in investments of up to half a billion euros in UKGM over the next 10 years.

In May, however, the Group unexpectedly terminated the corresponding “letter of intent” when it became clear that the war in Ukraine would drive up the costs of energy and new buildings. The state government immediately gave its assurance that it would share the additional financial burden. They would be “taken seriously” and “communal solutions would be found,” promised Science Minister Angela Dorn (Green Party).

Nevertheless, Rhön-Asklepios has refused to make any tangible promises regarding jobs, wages and the hiring of trainees. The 2017 collective employment agreement, which includes a complete ban on outsourcing and protection against dismissal, expires at the end of the year.

It is in this situation that the coalition government in Berlin is pushing ahead with its highly risky war policy. The German government is supplying Ukraine with ever more devastating weaponry in the fight against Russia, setting up a €100 billion “special fund,” not for care, but for the Bundeswehr (armed forces). And the working population, already struggling with inflation, must bear the cost.

Hospital workers are thus right to be worried and alarmed. On Tuesday, they showed once again the fighting potential that nursing staff collectively have and the support they can build on in the population. A case in point: a petition for the renationalization of the two university hospitals has received over 18,000 signatures.

But the warning strike also showed that this fight can no longer be left to the responsible service sector union, Verdi. It is—together with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party (Die Linke)—the biggest obstacle to achieving job security, the prevention of war and the pandemic and the protection of quality health care in the future.

What is required are independent rank-and-file committees, such as already exist among teachers and auto workers in the US, Sri Lanka and also among auto workers and nurses in Germany. They have the task of taking the struggle of care workers into their own hands and linking it with the struggle of other care workers and laborers. They do not focus on the profits of the corporations, but are dedicated to the health, safety and future of the workers.

Verdi is systematically isolating the struggle at UKGM from other labor struggles in the nursing sector. Within the last year, workers at several other university hospitals

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have gone on strike for weeks at a time. After Berlin's Charité and Vivantes struck, the university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia went on strike for 12 weeks before Verdi smothered the protest by selling the workers out. At Frankfurt University Hospital, too, employees are ready to strike because there is no relief whatsoever on the way. The same nursing crisis prevails everywhere.

And the next wave of the coronavirus is already looming. The pandemic has brought previously existing grievances to a head and made them broadly visible. "It is not the strike, rather the normal state of affairs that endangers the patients," a nurse in the Ruhr area succinctly put it. In Giessen in the fall and winter of 2020–2021, at the height of the pandemic wave, up to 110 COVID-19 sufferers were hospitalized at a given time, 45 of them in intensive care units, mostly on ventilators. The situation was similar in Marburg.

Since then, the employees have been working at or near their limits for almost three years, many having quit their jobs. Some have become seriously ill themselves and some have died. While a new pandemic wave with devastating consequences is threatening in the fall, monkeypox is spreading worldwide and polio is returning.

In this inflamed situation, Verdi only ever stages useless whistle protests and 24-hour strikes. In association with the Left Party, the union is leading the workers around by the nose. On Tuesday, Verdi organized a rally in Wiesbaden in front of the state parliament building to give politicians a platform for their lies and excuses.

No more than 120 employees from the two clinics took part. Together with journalists, full-time trade unionists and politicians, they surrounded the stage on which the health experts from the Greens, the CDU, the SPD and the Left spoke one after another. Amid boos, Minister for Science and the Arts Angela Dorn (Greens), claimed that she, too, had "always been against privatization."

The spokesman for the Hesse Left Party made it clear what goals are behind its campaign of "Return the hospital to public ownership!" He said, "Anyone who does not seriously consider this possibility is also a bit helpless when facing the corporation. We demand that there must be public money, state funds, only in exchange for public influence."

That translates as: The demand is intended as leverage for the government's negotiations with Rhön-Asklepios. It makes clear that the Left Party and Verdi do not themselves consider the "demand" for a return to public ownership—which they humbly address to the Christian Democrat-Green state government—to be in any way realistic.

In conversations with the WSWS, participants from the university hospitals made it clear that the workers are slowly losing patience with these protest and stalling tactics of the Verdi leaders, who themselves sit on all the supervisory boards.

Two operating room nurses from Marburg, employees of over 20 years, confirmed, "We have now reached the point where working conditions are worse than ever. … After privatization, we lost our Christmas bonus. But what is being expected of us today goes far beyond that, especially because the staffing situation is so strained."

A nurse responsible for training young nurses said, "We train a lot, we put our hearts and souls in it—clearly, since we are not getting extra time off for it. But the market is empty, and if conditions are that bad, young people won't stay with us." She added, "What I don't understand is why we don't actually strike together with the Frankfurt University Hospital?"

Frido, who has worked in the transport service in Marburg for more than 11 years, said, "So far these warning strikes haven't achieved anything at all. That's my impression. The politicians don't have any interest in talking to us. Privatization was a big mistake, but the government is not willing to correct the mistake."

His colleague added, "We are at the bottom, the lowest link in the chain. The transport service has been continuously understaffed for a long time. Some of us are now doing the work of two, sometimes three people. But we are not compensated for it. Amongst ourselves, we've been talking about mileage pay, because some of us have health problems from constantly walking and being on our feet far too much. That has gotten a lot worse."

When asked about the suggestion to fight together with nurses in Frankfurt, the Ruhr area and Berlin, Frido said, "That would be better: you can only achieve something together. If we stay isolated, they won't take us seriously at all. Why did we come here anyway?"

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