

Reject the sell-out contract at Frankfurt University Hospital! Build action committees!

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On October 25, Frankfurt University Hospital and the service sector union Verdi agreed to a “collective agreement for relief” (TV-E) covering about 4,000 workers. It would be more honest, however, to call it a “collective agreement for ever-increasing workloads.” Although the new coronavirus wave is already surging, the contract does not improve the situation for the exhausted staff.

The Frankfurt contract is even worse than those that were passed at the Charité and Vivantes hospitals in Berlin, and at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) last year.

In essence, these contracts specify a binding staffing level for each department per shift. If this falls short of the target, meaning health care staff must then do double the work as a result, they will not receive double the salary, but accumulate one “point” in a points-based system. While the Berlin contract provides for an additional free shift for five points, and the contract in NRW for seven points, no less than ten points are necessary for Frankfurt health care staff. This means they will receive just one additional free shift of 8 hours after working ten understaffed shifts.

It is a direct call to management to “Keep it up!,” since every instance of understaffing of workers is the hospital’s financial advantage. Moreover, the TV-E contract is not valid until August 1, 2023, by which time there will be a flat rate of three additional relief days, two of which will be paid out in cash because staff shortages do not allow for any additional free days.

For nurses and health care staff, this means initially holding out for another year working as before, with no expected changes after that, since the main problem, staff shortages, will still exist. If someone takes a day off, their colleagues must shoulder the additional

burden, a vicious circle that could only be broken by a fundamental abolition of the profits-before-lives policy in the pandemic and a massive investment in hospitals.

Outside of nursing, the contract provides for the creation of a total of 70 new full-time positions to be used in IT, kitchens, patient transport, lab services, radiology, and other departments—which is also far too few. For example, in patient transport, workers have reported to WSWs that more and more of their colleagues are quitting because of persistent overwork.

November 30 is to be the deadline to reject the deal: If there is neither a veto by the Frankfurt University Hospital supervisory board, nor a rejection by the union members by then, says Verdi negotiator Georg Schulze, “silence signifies consent.”

In the November vote, nurses, health care workers and all employees must vote No. Reject the TV-E contract sell-out! Support the Independent Rank-and-File Nursing Action Committee, founded by the WSWs and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) during the NRW nursing strike, and which collaborates with nurses worldwide. Read our statement: “Support nurses’ strike in North Rhine-Westphalia! Build independent Action Committees!”

As in NRW, and before that in Berlin, hospital workers in Frankfurt have shown great willingness to strike. They are part of an offensive by health care workers around the world. In Frankfurt, nursing staff have repeatedly taken industrial action for one-day and two-day strikes in the past year. In Berlin, a strike last autumn at the Vivantes and Charité hospitals lasted 50 days, and in North Rhine-Westphalia all six university hospitals were on strike for as long as eleven weeks.

The action committee advances concrete demands in the fight against the nursing crisis. One of these is: “For

each understaffed shift, workers must receive compensation equal to the wage of the absent worker plus 50 percent stress pay!” The reason being, “If you work for two, you must also be paid for two! This is the only way to end the perfidious system in which health companies enrich themselves from understaffing at the expense of our health!”

The conclusion of the contract in Frankfurt once again shows that health care workers are not only confronted by the political establishment and corporations in this struggle, but also with the trade union bureaucracy. Verdi is not waging a serious industrial dispute, but cementing in place the existing working conditions, which are a consequence of the government’s policies of war and allowing the pandemic to run wild. Pressure on wages is also increasing because of inflation and a prices explosion. On all these issues, the unions are on the side of the “traffic light” federal coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens.

At Frankfurt University Hospital, Verdi negotiators are on the side of management and the Hesse state government. They work closely with the state Minister of Science, Angela Dorn (Greens), who is also chairperson of the hospital’s supervisory board. Like all the unions, Verdi stands in the same boat as the government and does everything it can to suppress the class struggle.

For example, the union has not once called all nurses and health care workers out together. At the same time, staff at Marburg-Giessen University Hospital, also in Hesse, must defend themselves against spin-offs and job cuts.

Verdi negotiator Georg Schulze has decades of experience in isolating struggles from each other and breaking them off again early. He also took the lead in stalling the kindergarten strike movement for better working conditions in 2015, and also helped organise the privatisation of the Marburg-Giessen University Hospital, on whose supervisory board he sat for a long time.

The latest agreement at Frankfurt University Hospital comes at a time when the contract covering 2.3 million public sector workers is expiring. The Frankfurt agreement serves the primary purpose of preventing an effective labour struggle developing that could change the situation.

Poor working conditions have further worsened in the course of the pandemic, and sick leave is again high. The state of Hesse, which is responsible, even briefly tried to send nurses with positive COVID tests back to work early. Before the new wave of infections with the highly contagious BA.5 virus, Minister Dorn decreed that it was enough to be symptom-free for two days after a COVID-19 infection and to show a negative rapid test to return to work. In doing so, the minister risks creating new, dangerous coronavirus hotspots in hospitals.

While enormous discontent has existed for months, the government and hospital management are trying to put a real muzzle on health workers.

At the height of the first coronavirus wave, in September 2020, the university hospital’s personnel director circulated a letter stating that employees were only allowed to speak to “any press and answer interview questions” about hospital care and operational organisation “after prior coordination and approval by the Communications Staff Office.” The staff council initially rejected this, but reached an agreement with hospital management in June 2022. Now there is a new letter, supplemented with examples of what employees are allowed to do and what they are not.

According to this, “spontaneous statements remain possible [when] in compliance with the legal obligations of confidentiality under collective agreements and employment contracts,” and employees are allowed to spontaneously “provide an insight into their own emotional world” if they do not divulge internal information.

The *Frankfurter Neue Presse* quotes examples from the letter. “I am depressed because too few of us have to do too much” is permitted. What is prohibited, on the other hand, are sentences like: “I am depressed because a coronavirus patient died on my shift yesterday.”



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