

Warning strikes on Austria's railroads and in hospitals

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On Monday, most rail traffic in Austria was at a standstill due to a nationwide strike. Negotiations on a new collective agreement for railroad workers were suspended on Sunday without a result; transport and services union Vida therefore called a 24-hour warning strike for the next day.

The strike affected long-distance and regional services, as well as commuter trains. Cross-border train services to Germany have also been suspended since Sunday night.

The privately owned Westbahn, which is not on strike, was also affected, as trains could not use the Vienna, Linz and Salzburg stations due to the strike. The company, 49.9 percent of which is owned by the Haselsteiner Family Private Foundation, 32.7 percent by Switzerland's August Holding AG and 17.40 percent by French state railroads SNCF, said it was "shocked that the strike was not avoided."

At local transit company Innsbrucker Verkehrsbetriebe (IVB), a works meeting was held Monday to decide on a possible solidarity strike. Even if this is not the case, IVB management expected extensive restrictions on several bus lines in the Tyrolean capital.

Vida represents some 50,000 rail employees and is demanding a flat-rate monthly wage increase of €400, which would amount to an average increase of about 12 percent, according to the union. This is in line with inflation in the month of October in Austria.

Employers had initially offered a deal of €200 and a one-time payment of €1,000. After rail employees rejected this meagre increase, the union rejected the offer. As a result, the employers increased it by a paltry €8, according to union sources.

However, Vida continued to reiterate its willingness to talk even after the provocative offer by Austrian Railways (ÖBB) and the breakdown of negotiations on Sunday and signalled its intention to approach the railroad companies. From the union's point of view, the strike, which is limited to one day, serves to control the explosive anger in the workforce. The union is playing the same role in the strike by health workers at Vienna's hospitals.

Strikes at Viennese hospitals

In the capital, staff at six convent-run hospitals went on a warning strike last Wednesday. A new collective agreement is being negotiated for the non-profit hospitals, which are partly funded by the provincial states. Although the negotiations affect all the provinces, and two rounds of negotiations have already been inconclusive, Vida called for only a half-day protest in Vienna.

Strikes and protests by doctors and other hospital staff have occurred repeatedly in recent years. Ten years ago, medical staff in Upper Austria went on strike, followed a year later by their colleagues in Carinthian provincial hospitals. In 2015 and 2016, strikes in Vienna were just barely avoided. The conflict has been smouldering ever since, and the immense strains resulting from the coronavirus pandemic have now been the straw that broke the camel's back.

In the face of horrendous inflation, staff are fighting for more pay. Yet Vida's demands are far from compensating for massive price rises, let alone the miserable deals reached in recent negotiations. The employers countered the union demand for a gross monthly increase of €500 or a minimum wage of €2,000 with an offer that can only be described as a provocation, offering a one-time payment of a maximum of €1,000 and to bring forward the next negotiations by two months.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the already tense situation in the hospitals has become increasingly precarious. It has long been known that the hospitals are working with far too few staff. Public hospitals, in particular, became pioneers in making savings.

"Hospitals are a rather personnel-intensive structure, whereby especially convent-run hospitals traditionally show a high efficiency," the *Wiener Zeitung* quotes economist Maria Hofmarcher. She added, "The flip side of this: high work intensity for the staff and lower salaries."

That staff shortages are to the detriment of both employees

and patients is made clear by a survey of hospital physicians.

Eighty-four percent of Vienna's hospital doctors stated that the present conditions would "lead to a continuing and sustained loss of quality in medical care for patients." Sixty-four percent "strongly agreed" with this statement, and another 20 percent "tended to agree." Only 2 percent "strongly disagreed" with the statement. Seventy-eight percent agreed with the statement that there were major bottlenecks in patient care at Vienna's hospitals.

Eighty-two percent stated that the current conditions were leading to a continuing and sustained loss of quality in medical training.

At the same time, physicians are clear that the Viennese city administration was not taking any measures to improve the situation. Seventy-two percent stated that Vienna's city politicians were doing "nothing about the problems in Vienna's hospitals." And 68 percent agreed that City Health Councillor Peter Hacker (Austrian Social Democratic Party, SPÖ) was "not taking the signs of danger from Viennese hospitals seriously enough."

There has long been criticism of the fact that both the provincial government of the SPÖ and Neos parties and the previous SPÖ-Green Party government have completely ignored the situation in hospitals, which is potentially life-threatening for patients.

Nursing staff also criticize the serious loss of quality because of poor working conditions. According to Chamber of Labour President Renate Anderl, around 85 percent of nursing staff stated that at least one nursing task had often been omitted or delayed in their team in the last two weeks. This is also shown by the current MissCare Austria study by the Karl Landsteiner Private University, which was presented on November 23.

As a result of the lack of services, dangerous diseases were being detected less often and many patients discharged from hospital being poorly informed. This in turn led to avoidable readmissions to hospital. Nursing representatives have so far called in vain for a significant increase in staffing ratios to ensure safe care.

According to current estimates, there will be a shortage of around 80,000 nursing staff in Austria by 2030. In addition to which, there is a shortage of other medical staff.

Federal Health Minister Johannes Rauch (Greens) seeks to shift responsibility to the states, knowing full well that it is precisely the coronavirus policy of the Austrian Peoples Party-Green Party federal government that has led to a considerable worsening of the situation in hospitals. Rauch, who is already the third Green Party health minister since the beginning of the pandemic, is considered a strict opponent of coronavirus protective measures. Even though officially there are still around 5,000 new infections every

day—the number of unreported cases is probably many times higher—he recently repeated that the situation was "stable."

Collective bargaining in commerce and the metal industry

Further strikes could follow in the next days and weeks also in the commercial sector. Here, the GPA union is demanding a wage increase of 10 percent and threatening to strike, if necessary, while the employers have offered just 4 percent.

With the strikes, the unions are trying to let off steam, knowing full well that the workforce is seething. But it is obvious that the unions are the mainstay of the corporations and the government and support passing on the rising costs to employees.

This was made clear in the recent wage settlement in the metal industry, where the unions agreed on a painful cut in real wages for the approximately 130,000 employees. Thus, with an official inflation rate of almost 12 percent, wages will rise by just 7.4 percent. Companies and unions are now trying to impose a similar sell-out on rail, retail, and hospital workers.

Workers around the world are facing the same issues. Everywhere, the unions are working hand in hand with the corporations and government to push through ferocious attacks on working conditions and wages. In Germany, the IG Metall union recently agreed to its third consecutive cut in real wages. In the US, the unions, in close alliance with the Biden administration, are desperately trying to suppress a national rail workers strike—but opposition to this is growing.

For workers worldwide to succeed in their struggles, they must organize independently and network across plants and internationally. The International Committee of the Fourth International has formed the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to give direction to these struggles and coordinate them internationally.



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