Striking hospital workers across Germany call for all-out action against cuts in real wages and excessive workloads

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Outrage over disastrous working conditions and cuts in real wages in the public sector is boiling over, but the trade union Verdi is trying every means at its disposal to prevent an all-out strike in the dispute with the federal and local governments. The union is deliberately keeping the "warning strikes" small, isolating them by sector and region.

After individual strikes in public transport, municipal cleansing and nurseries in recent weeks, industrial action continued on Monday at airports in Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg and Hanover. On Tuesday and Wednesday, work was then suspended mainly at hospitals, and in isolated cases also in public transport and at municipal savings banks.

In Brandenburg, the Ernst von Bergmann and Brandenburg/Havel hospitals went on strike on Tuesday. In Berlin, the Charité and hospitals in the Vivantes group as well as the Jewish Hospital joined the strike and, unlike their Brandenburg colleagues, continued it on Wednesday.

The demonstrations by strikers on Tuesday in Potsdam and on Wednesday in Berlin-Wedding were both attended by several hundred workers and the anger was palpable. Every participant could tell of almost unbearable working conditions and the complete overload they face in the hospitals. In view of inflation of over 30 percent for food and energy, Verdi's demand for around a 10.5 percent increase still means a substantial decrease in wages and would thereby also further worsen the staffing situation in hospitals.

The employers' "offer" is even worse: a 3.5 percent wage increase to be spread over three years, or a little more than 1 percent per year. If current inflation continues, this would more than halve real wages! In addition, the Municipal Employers' Association wants to reinstate the "Collective Agreement to Secure the Future of Hospitals," which allows hospitals that find themselves in an economic predicament to cut wages by up to 6 percent. Given the severe budget cuts in the health care sector, this will probably affect most hospitals. So, after three years of the pandemic and facing horrendous inflation, local governments even want to cut basic pay rates for overworked employees!

But health workers are determined to resist.

Mustafa, who works at Vivantes, is outraged: "I have been working here for three years, and since then there has never been a wage increase. What we need now is a wage increase of 25 percent; 10.5 percent is still a real wage cut. Nor will we get rid of the staff shortage with 10.5 percent. In my ward, we have 19 vacant full-time positions."

Stefan from Klinikum Ernst von Bergmann said, "For conditions to really improve, we would need 40 percent more staff. Basically, nursing should not be treated as a commodity." He finds it "terrible" that €100 billion are now being spent on rearmament instead.

Marlene, who works on the surgical ward at Klinikum Ernst von Bergmann, said, "For me, the last few years have always meant more work because everyone else is completely exhausted. I put my heart and soul into working with patients, but that's no longer possible today. You're just exhausted and you don't have time for the patients anymore. At the same time, many people, especially when they are seriously ill or injured, just want to get a few things off their chest. Psychological care after operations used to be important. Today, that falls flat. You must have the time you need for your work!"

Marlene sees a connection between the public sector strikes in Germany and the labour struggles taking place across Europe and internationally: "What is happening in

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other countries, especially in France, is quite impressive. We have people working here from many different countries, for example, Moldova or the Philippines. They should have the same rights. If they all went on strike together, that would be totally strong. The refuse collectors and administrative workers should be here, too."

Phillip, who works as a nurse at Vivantes, also supports a joint fight together with other professional groups. "The rising gas prices affect a baker just the same as me. Actually, it's an absurdity that, for example, technicians or cleaners, who also work in the hospital, are not called on to strike."

"It would make sense if everyone went on strike together," said Leonie, Anna and Zoe, who are second-year surgery theatre trainees. "The price increases affect everyone and are really difficult, especially if you live alone," said Leonie. "There are massive staff shortages. If you made the job more attractive, including financially, the problem would be less."

The three report that the glaring staff shortage has dire consequences for trainees and patients. "In the anaesthesia suite, we are almost not supervised at all," one said, "because there is only one instructor left. We are left alone with patients without being asked. This leads to patient endangerment and can have legal consequences for us. We are not prepared for every situation. If something goes wrong during anaesthesia or a patient has breathing problems, it can be potentially life-threatening. If something happens that you have no experience with, you're screwed. Patient safety is not guaranteed. That's a responsibility you can't carry."

Leonie, Anna and Zoe view the massive spending on the armed forces with great concern. "That's money you can't imagine," Zoe said. "We should be supported at least as much. As a health care system, we are the future and a pillar of society. Everyone gets old or sick at some point and needs help." Phillip also thinks that "the €100 billion should go to education, for example. They've been cutting corners there for years, too."

Myriam, a trainee in gynaecology at the Charité, thinks it is completely wrong to "spend billions on war and armaments when normal workers and employees in the health care system don't have enough money to pay their bills." She, too, reports staff shortages in all the wards she passed through as a trainee. These were now being made up in a makeshift way with agency staff, who would be paid even less. "I know that contracts are being made with countries like Mexico and Romania to organize staff who are then employed at reduced wages."

Considering these disastrous conditions, Myriam has little faith in Verdi. "The union does too little and hardly makes itself felt," she said.

Another colleague, who wished to remain anonymous, explains that she left Verdi long ago. "You're not doing anything, I told them, what are you collecting my money for? Now they say, we're striking for the first time in 20 years, and act as if no one wanted to strike before. But we always wanted to strike, it just didn't happen. I think the people at Deutsche Post, the airports and the hospitals should all strike together."

But Verdi fears just such an all-out strike, as workers are demanding in the face of miserable working conditions and pay cuts. The union is not on the side of the workers, but of the federal and state governments and corporations with which it is closely linked. Verdi had just now sabotaged the strike at Deutsche Post. Despite 86 percent of its members voting in favour of a strike, the union called it off and forced workers to vote on the same contract they had just overwhelmingly rejected.

As a result, the Postal Action Committee, in which workers are joining together independently of Verdi to take the strike into their own hands, is receiving a lot of support. Public sector workers must also organize themselves into independent action committees to link their own strike with that of postal and rail workers. They must see themselves as part of the European and international offensive of the working class against wage cuts and war.

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