

## Austria: Revolution in the health service?

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The mood among employees of the Austrian health service has finally turned. After the introduction of the new Medical Working Hours Act, doctors took to the barricades and mounted a militant opposition to the loss of wages and more cuts. Now, other professional groups, above all the nurses, are showing their anger and dissatisfaction with the present situation and demanding change. Through the Care-Revolution movement, health service workers have been publicising their problems and demands with placards and photos.

Are they all crazy?

The workers have had enough of always accepting everything. Constant intensification of work and overloading is simply no longer bearable. For outsiders it might be difficult to understand or give the appearance that the workers in the health service have suddenly gone crazy. Not at all, for years they have been facing worsening conditions which result in constant reports of abuses and discontent. The current events are not a sudden development but rather an expression of the years of cuts and steadily worsening working conditions.

All of this is taking place, obviously, against the background of the still rumbling crisis of capitalism. The government's austerity measures always hit the working class population. For example, in the federal budget until 2016, the hospitals will receive €1.4 trillion less than previously, while, on the other side, top management salaries keep rising.

No longer simmering, now it's boiling!

Over the last few years, there have been repeated protests from sections of the workforce. The health service has seen not only small-scale but also bigger struggles such as against the proposed wage freeze in 2012 or the strikes over wage negotiations in Upper Austria and the campaign by agency workers against job losses.

Often, disputes in the health sector have remained at the regional level or been restricted to particular professional groups and so government and management have been able to deal with the protests by making minor concessions to the workers.

Media attention has also always been very limited, one would have to research quite systematically to learn anything about the situation in the health sector. That changed abruptly with the protests by the doctors and nurses in Salzburg, now the health sector is the centre of attention in the media. Until now, it has been the doctors who received the most attention because their struggle was the most developed. However, now the non-medical professions are protesting and getting the attention they deserve.

Care revolution

The Hospital Working Hours Act also threatens the non-medical staff with wage cuts. In response to this, nursing staff and other professional groups have been successful in recent months in building a militant rank and file initiative against worsening conditions. In the provincial clinics of Salzburg the movement Care Revolution was set up and made an impact with photo actions and placards. Two workplace meetings were held with hundreds of workers who demonstrated in support of their key demands, 30 per cent more pay and greater recognition of the caring professions.

The resistance in Salzburg is also not isolated. It became a model for other colleagues across Austria and spread to several provinces. New initiatives and groups of colleagues have now been set up not only in Salzburg but also in Upper Austria, the Tyrol and in Vienna and they are calling for a revolution in health care.

### CaREvolution Vienna

In Vienna, there are plenty of grounds for protest. Overloading, staff shortages, beds in corridors have long been commonplace. On top of that, there are now new problems such as the chaotic introduction of the "co-responsibility system". More and more procedures are now covered by nursing staff and secure care can no longer be guaranteed.

At a networking meeting of employees from the Vienna hospitals in March, the initiative CaREvolution Vienna was founded, following the example in Salzburg. This was organised by activists from the socialist workplace bulletins "Heartbeat" and "Plain Talking" in order to bring together all the militant forces in the Viennese health sector. The next step was for nurses and other caring professions to form their own block around the activists of Heartbeat, Plain Talking and Workers' Standpoint on a demonstration by doctors and to call for a common struggle of all the professional groups. The Facebook site, CaREvolution Vienna, has created a public forum which can draw in more colleagues and supporters. The site will allow discussions of employees' problems and also a place for pictures videos and reports of actions etc. CaREvolution Vienna will hold regular networking meetings in order to bring together colleagues to discuss demands and organise action.

Build a rank-and-file movement in the health sector!

CaREvolution must now go forward to organise actions in order to get the movement going. It needs to draw militant activists into a democratic process to decide on its demands. This includes, of course, discussion over what kind of action and structures are necessary, one short-term objective, for example, could be the holding of workplace meetings in the different hospitals and the building of action committees.

In the longer term, it will be necessary to build rank-and-file movements in the health sector which can fight for increased staffing levels and more funding for the whole health sector. For this, they must aim to draw in the trade unions and to mobilise the existing fighting organisations of workers to organise action under the democratic control of the workers themselves. In the event of a strike, for example, we need democratic strike committees. Only when the nurses and other staff in the health sector organise themselves in this way will there be a real revolution in the health sector.

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