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Poland

“Health care is dying, either you finish it or you save it”

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV560 - September 2021 -

Publication date: Saturday 18 September 2021

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On Saturday 11 September between 30,000 and 40,000 health care workers demonstrated in Warsaw. After the demonstration they occupied the street in front of the Prime Minister’s office, set up tents and announced that the movement would continue until victory.

This is the first time that such a massive mobilization has united the various medical and paramedical categories - nurses and midwives (whose union OZZPiP was at the origin of the movement) but also doctors, interns, paramedics, physiotherapists, diagnosticists... Even hospital directors have given their support.

The National Committee for the Strike and Mobilization of Health Workers has formulated eight demands, including:

- immediate modification of the law on the minimum wage of employees of medical structures,
- immediate increase of 30 per cent in the reimbursement of medical services
- immediate increase of 80 per cent in the reimbursement of ambulance drivers,
- a new evaluation of all services,
- hiring of additional staff,
- guarantee of the status of public civil servant to the medical professions,
- special leave after 15 years of work.

The pandemic has highlighted the effects of the destruction of the public health system in Poland. Underpaid, the medical staff is aging: an average nurse is 53 years old, a hospital doctor 51. There are on average 5.2 nurses per 1000 inhabitants, while the EU average is 8.4. Working hours are exploding: 300 to 400 hours per month in hospitals, more than 500 hours in ambulances. "Can patients accept a tired caregiver who can make a mistake at any time? We are responsible for their health and their lives.

The strikers demand a health budget of 6.8 per cent of GDP (the draft national budget for 2022 proposes 5.75 per cent). The nurses are demanding a gross monthly salary equivalent to €1756 - it is currently €768.

“Mr. Prime Minister, nurses are on the brink and the state of emergency has been going on for a very long time as far as we are concerned,” says nurse Dorota Gardias, who chairs the third trade union center FZZ, referring to the government’s decision to impose a state of emergency at the Belarusian border to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers. “I would not be surprised if you deploy barbed wire around the hospitals while thanking in the media the caregivers for their hard work.” The strike committee refused the invitation to “dialogue” from the Minister of Health and will only negotiate in the presence of the Prime Minister.

Wojciech Szafraniec, head of the interns’ union, explains: “Recently, doctors couldn’t even manage to issue death certificates. Many people thought it was the fault of the caregivers. Society has been confused for a long time. When the government urges them to vaccinate, people don’t want to listen anymore, they don’t understand these messages.”

In order to confront this situation, health care workers in Poland have joined together in the struggle. An example to follow, because the destruction-privatization of the public health service is underway throughout the European Union.

15 September 2021

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PS:

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