

# Germany: Biggest public service strike for 14 years

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On Monday, February 6, several thousand public service employees stopped work in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Workers employed in garbage disposal, at hospitals, kindergartens, libraries and swimming pools as well as in many other local council facilities began to strike. The industrial action in southwest Germany is a prelude to an unlimited strike throughout the country.

According to public service union Verdi, the strike will be extended to Hamburg and Lower Saxony over the coming week, with strike ballots being held in Bavaria, Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia and the Saarland. The strike is aimed at preventing an extension of the working week from 38.5 to 40 hours for local council employees and an associated reduction in wages.

The last nationwide public service strike took place 14 years ago under the Christian Democratic government led by Helmut Kohl.

The strike has already come in for harsh criticism from local council employers, the employers' associations, politicians and the media. Lower Saxony Finance Minister Hartmut Mölling (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), who presently heads the association of regional state employers, has said that all public service workers, including those employed at a local level, will have to accept cutbacks in view of the desolate state of public finances. His colleague in Baden-Württemberg, Gerhard Stratthaus (CDU), warned against extending the strike to state level.

The chairman of the government's advisory council, Bert Rürup, told the press he could see no grounds for the strike. People have to work longer hours in all sectors of the economy, he argued. Moreover, he feared the strike would have a negative effect on Germany's weak economic situation.

The president of the Federal Association of German Employers, Dieter Hundt, demanded the union call off the strike immediately. The strike was irresponsible and damaged Germany, Hundt declared. Christian Social Union (CSU) politician Max Straubinger echoed these remarks, telling the *Berliner Zeitung* that in view of fact that public service provided secure jobs he had no sympathy for the strike, which should be ended forthwith.

Some Social Democratic Party (SPD) politicians, such as SPD labour market spokesman Klaus Brandner, tried to sound more conciliatory, recalling that the union had already agreed to massive wage restraints over the past years.

The assertion that the strike is illegitimate because public service workers still enjoy secure jobs and other privileges is completely groundless. Apart from those with civil service status, other blue- and white-collar public sector workers have had no job security for a long time. Since the beginning of the 1990s, one in three municipal jobs has either been cut, privatised or fallen victim to other austerity measures. Some 2.2 million public service jobs have been destroyed over the last 15 years.

Moreover, many new hirings have been only on the basis of limited employment contracts or as part-time working, which is extremely labour-intensive and poorly paid.

The strike casts a sharp light on social conditions in present-day Germany.

Over the past seven years, social attacks that had begun under the Kohl government were considerably stepped up under the SPD-Green Party administration. The empty coffers at the local and state level, which are cited as the reason for the present cuts and austerity measures, are a result of the systematic redistribution of

wealth from the bottom of society to the top. The tax breaks for the rich and well-off, as well as for big business, have led to diminishing tax revenues for the public purse, while an ever-greater financial burden has been shifted from the federal government to the states and municipalities.

Many corporations boast that they do not pay a single cent in taxes. The burden of the growing financial crisis at the state and local level has been systematically transferred to those working in the public service. That is why the strike has met with widespread support; in Baden-Württemberg, some 95 percent of the union members voted for the strike.

Almost every striker who has been interviewed in the media has stressed that the dispute is not only directed against the 18 minutes' unpaid additional work per day, but that the employers' decision to increase working time was merely the straw that broke the camel's back. Wages and conditions have been worsening for years.

"At some point, enough is enough. We cannot swallow everything," declared Uko Gran, who has worked in garbage disposal in Mannheim for many years, on the way to a union demonstration. And his colleague described how their work has changed over the past years. Whereas in the past, there were four in a team working on garbage disposal, now it is only three. Breaks have been continually cut, although the workload constantly increases.

"A strike only gets nearly 95 percent support if there is real anger," commented Astrid Hölscher in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and stressed, "That is, perhaps, the greatest mistake the employers have made in underestimating the degree of discord among the workforce. After years of real wages cuts, increasing workloads and job cuts, these 18 minutes were a step too far."

It is not only the public service employers and the government that have underestimated the growing popular anger, but also the trade unions, which have accepted every social cut over the past years. Last autumn, Verdi had great difficulty getting union members to accept a new contract agreeing to concessions.

For the first time, the union signed up for the introduction of performance-related pay and the cutting of a wide range of bonus payments. Wages and salaries

were practically frozen until 2007. Using the argument that it wanted to prevent any further outsourcing, Verdi accepted the introduction of a new low-wage category, thereby introducing cheap wage working by collective agreement.

At that time, the director of the Association of Local Councils and Municipalities, Gerd Landsberg, praised the new contract with the words, "The road is now clear for a viable public service in 13,000 cities and municipalities." Verdi was even prepared to place a question mark over the contractually specified 38.5-hour working week (in the west) and 40 hours (in the east) by accepting a break clause in the contract.

Just months after the new contract was agreed upon, the union's acquiescence has encouraged the employers to try to extend the working week by implementing the break clause.

Now the union is concentrating on trying to keep in check the growing radicalisation that has begun with the strike. While on demonstrations they denounce the employers for a "breach of contract" and say the strike will take more aggressive forms than in 1992, at the same time Verdi functionaries are trying to limit the strike to individual actions and prevent a nationwide labour dispute.

Above all, faced with mass sackings in many branches of industry, which at AEG in Nuremberg had already led to a strike, they fear that an extensive strike in the public sector might unleash widespread action in other industries.

So far, the government has steered clear of the dispute in its statements. There is no doubt, however, that Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), who has already announced he plans to use the armed forces over the summer to protect the World Cup soccer championship, will use the harshest measures should the trade unions be unable to contain the strike.



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