

Verdi trade union expands labour dispute

German public service strike grows into confrontation with the grand coalition

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Last Monday, February 13, the German service trade union Verdi expanded its public sector strike when 22,000 employees in seven German states—North Rhine-Westphalia, Rheinland-Pfalz, Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, Saxony, Bavaria, Bremen and Hamburg—refused to show up for the early shift.

The strike, which now involves 40,000 workers, is aimed at preventing an extension of the working week for local council workers from 38.5 to 40 hours without additional pay, a move union leaders say could lead to the elimination of 250,000 jobs.

The walkout that now affects every western state in Germany except for Hessen has shut down or severely restricted garbage disposal, kindergartens, hospitals, various social welfare institutions, road service and numerous state administrative bodies.

The strike began February 6 in the states of Baden-Württemberg and the Saarland. Following a demand from the local employers' association that any renewed negotiations depended on workers returning to their jobs, union representatives called off talks. Afterwards, additional workers—including employees at two universities in Stuttgart and motorway maintenance workers—walked out in Baden-Württemberg alongside garbage disposal and child-care workers who were already striking. With no one to clean up the heavy snows that had fallen in the area, traffic was severely delayed.

In the run up to the strike, 60,000 union members in nearly all the German states voted by a margin of 94.5 percent for strike action. In Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate the Education and Science trade union (GEW) and even the police officers' union received a similarly high vote in favour of a strike. At the six university clinics in North-Rhine/Westphalia, the National Union of Civil Servants also called for its members to take part in the strike.

The expansion of the action across the country has turned the strike increasingly into a confrontation with Chancellor Angela Merkel and Germany's grand coalition government, which comprises the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the Christian Social Union (CSU). The government, backed by major banks and employers, such as Volkswagen, that are carrying out their own sweeping job cuts, is determined to defeat the public sector workers and set a precedent for a fundamental rollback in the conditions and social rights of all German workers.

As the strike has expanded, leading members of Verdi have signaled their readiness for a compromise to avert an open confrontation with the government. Verdi Chairman Frank Bsirske noted that his trade union had "never ruled out changes in the public services" and "had supported many compromises in the past." Now, he declared, the

employers must be ready to make concessions. At the same time, it was unacceptable that the employers dictate "working times" in a completely arbitrarily fashion, Bsirske told the *Bild* newspaper last weekend.

After years of repeated concessions by the trade unions, conditions have steadily worsened for public service workers. This is a major factor behind the militancy and readiness to strike of many employees. The record of betrayed struggles and giveaways granted by the trade unions is long.

Last autumn, Verdi signed a collective agreement in which the union not only agreed to the axing of additional payments, but also the virtual freeze of wages and salaries until 2007. Claiming wage concessions were necessary to prevent further outsourcing of jobs, Verdi accepted the introduction of a new low-wage category and a clause regarding work-time regulation, which laid the groundwork for the employers' current demands.

None of the militant performances by Verdi officials at current strike meetings can conceal the fact the union made it possible for the employers to bypass existing collective agreements in order to extend the working week from 38.5 to 40 hours without compensation.

With the co-operation of Verdi and its forerunner organisation, the ÖTV (Union of Public Workers' Transport and Traffic), as well as the factory-based personnel councils, 2.2 million public sector jobs—or one third of the workforce—have been lost, transferred or privatised in the past decade and a half. Employers have made increased demands on those who kept their jobs, wages have declined, and public services have been severely undermined.

As a result, camera teams looking for critical opinions over the past few days at strike-affected hospitals were only able to elicit expressions of support, including from patients, for the action taken by nurses and care workers. Under the pressure from rank-and-file workers, comments from the Verdi leadership have alternated from threats that the strike can last several weeks, perhaps even months—according to Bsirske, "our strike fund is well filled"—to public pronouncements that the union hopes a compromise can be reached soon.

However, a speaker for the local employers' associations (KAV) and the State Tariff Community (TdL) reacted to the union's stance with their own threat, declaring that the states and municipalities were also well prepared for this conflict and could "hold out for quite some time," according to the state negotiator and Finance Minister for Lower Saxony Hartmut Möllring (CDU). In addition, Möllring threatened, the population would not tolerate for long a strike that led

to closed kindergartens and overflowing garbage cans.

There are indications that some politicians have prepared and planned the confrontation with Verdi for a long time. Their aim is to inflict a devastating defeat and ensure that the union functions at all levels as cooperative co-managers in the gutting of public services.

In a similar manner to which Volkswagen management recently revealed the corrupt and decadent practices of its own factory council—practices it had financed and known about for a long time—in order to implement the axing of 20,000 jobs, a strike defeat for Verdi will serve to intensify the privatisation of public services and associated job losses and welfare cuts.

Leading figures from the SPD and CDU are working to this end hand-in-hand with the government. After the first week of the strike, the mayor of Mannheim and negotiator for local employers in the southwest, Gerhard Widder (SPD), stressed that in view of the strike by garbage workers, private companies would soon have to be used for garbage disposal. Otherwise, “untenable hygienic conditions” would develop, he said. In the city of Freiburg, casual workers have already been used as strikebreakers.

It is not the first time that a strike in the German public services has developed into a confrontation with the government. Memories of the major public workers’ union strike of 1974 are still fresh. The wage demand at that time of 15 percent was part of a broad mobilisation in many factories aimed at forcing the government of Willy Brandt (SPD) to make concessions to workers’ demands. When public service employers refused to concede to their demands, 210,000 public service employees went on strike in the middle of February 1974. Suburban traffic, garbage disposal and many other areas of public service were paralysed for days. Even a personal intervention by the German president at that time, Gustav Heinemann (SPD), went unheeded.

Workers at the time were able to obtain wage increases of up to 11 percent—at least 170 marks per month—and celebrated their action as a major victory. Because of his inability to defy the workers, Willy Brandt was replaced one year later as chancellor by Helmut Schmidt (SPD), who, in cooperation with the trade union leadership, implemented a drastic austerity course.

The situation was very different 18 years later, when the second-biggest strike in German public services led to a confrontation with the Kohl government—a coalition of the CDU/CSU and the free market FDP (Free Democratic Party). Although the strike by the public workers’ union ÖTV was joined by employees from the post office and even the police, as well as the German employees’ federation, involving a total of 330,000 workers and civil employees in a strike lasting several days, ÖTV Chairman Monika Wulf Mathies accepted a rotten compromise to ensure the strike did not threaten the government itself. In a strike ballot, a majority of union members voted down the deal, but the public workers’ union signed it anyway.

Monika Wulf Mathies received her reward two years later when she was appointed commissioner for regional promotion for the European Union, until she resigned in 1999 following allegations of corruption in her area of responsibility. Since 2001 she has headed the central area of Policy and Environment for *German Post World Net AG*, which, with 380,000 employees, is one of the largest logistics companies in the world.

Today, the trade union leadership is also trying to prevent a political confrontation with the government. Verdi leader Bsirske, who five years ago organised the fusion of the service trade union by uniting five individual trade unions, has always been interested in close

partnership and cooperation with public service employers.

He knows first-hand the arguments and the line taken by employers with regard to cutting jobs and dismantling services. Three years before the founding of Verdi, Frank Bsirske had taken over as personnel department head in the city of Hanover using his connections with the ÖTV in Lower Saxony and his influence in the Green Party, of which he is a member. In this function, he eliminated nearly 1,000 of the 16,000 jobs in the city administration.

The strike raises very fundamental political questions. The grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD will not hesitate to forcibly suppress the strike should it continue to escalate. Having emerged out of a parliamentary manoeuvre, and in defiance of the constitution and the will of the electorate, this government is determined to impose the interests of Germany’s major companies, banks and trade associations with all the power at its disposal.

German Interior Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), already plans to employ German troops in Germany during this year’s soccer world championship, although this is expressly prohibited by the postwar constitution. There can be no doubt he would use the army to break the strike of public service employees.

With the strike turning increasingly into a confrontation with the government, it is clear that what is at stake is much more than a mere trade union struggle. What is required is a political perspective, which opposes the logic of the free market and the demands being made by all the parties of big business, including the SPD and Greens, for the dismantling of job protections and past social gains.

The public sector strikers must strive to link up their struggle with the strikers at the AEG in Nuremberg, Volkswagen employees, and other workers threatened by dismissal and welfare cuts, and develop a broad political mobilisation against the Merkel government and its coalition partners. At the centre of such a struggle must be the building of a mass political movement of the working class based on a socialist programme that places the interests of workers and the population at large above the profit interests of big business.



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