

German public workers strike

A discussion with Hamburg strikers: ‘It is much more serious than 14 years ago’

A WSWWS reporting team
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On February 6, German public service employees began strike action affecting such services as sanitation, hospitals, kindergartens, libraries and recreational facilities. The walkout began after the public service union Verdi conducted a ballot of sections of its membership, resulting in large majorities for a strike.

The strike is aimed first and foremost at preventing an extension of the workweek from 38.5 to 40 hours for local council employees. It is the first nationwide public sector strike in 14 years, and the first major industrial action since the installation of a Grand Coalition government headed by Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union and including the Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party.

The following interviews were conducted with striking workers in the city of Hamburg on February 17.

“The situation has changed here dramatically during the past few years,” Holger Linné told the *World Socialist Web Site*. The 46-year-old has worked for the city sanitation department in Hamburg for the past 11 years. He said that the workload had increased considerably.

When he began working, Linné said, his garbage disposal team consisted of five persons—a driver and four colleagues who retrieved, emptied and returned the garbage cans. “Today,” he pointed out, “there are only three persons—one driver and two colleagues, who fetch, empty and return.”

Linné was standing with about 200 colleagues in front of the sanitation office in Bullerdeich, an industrial area not far from Hamburg city center. The city’s 2,500 sanitation workers had been on strike for one week.

On this particular morning Wolfgang Rose, the regional chairman of the workers’ union, Verdi, was due to come and speak to the strikers. It was cold and drizzling rain. Linné warmed himself before a wood fire burning in an iron basket.

He said he had three children to look after, but did not hesitate in deciding to support the vote to strike. “I do not believe anybody here voted against it. Quite the opposite, if we had our way many more public service departments would have been called out on strike.”

He said that while the workload had increased, pay

supplements and social security benefits have continuously declined. “It is even worse for those who are younger. Any new jobs are only with short-term contracts with far lower wage rates than those with fixed contracts.”

Sven Meyer is 42 years old and has worked for the sanitation department for 15 years. Shortly after he started work the last major public workers strike began in 1992.

“When I look back and compare it with the strike today, I become rather skeptical,” he said. “At that time hundreds of thousands were on strike, and we still ended up with a lousy compromise. Since then many jobs have been lost. I believe at least one third of all jobs have gone in our department.”

Sven gave an example of the way in which the workload had increased. “Formerly, there were seven large street sweeping machines and one small one. Now there are just two large machines and one small machine. Along with the cutback in sweeping machines has naturally come a loss of jobs. Instead of employing new people, the department calls on us to work overtime, and the workloads have increased substantially. Since the introduction of a new shift system the few machines available have been worked to full capacity.”

He continued: “I want to stress one thing. We are not just striking here for ourselves. It is not just about the extra 18 minutes a day (which the employers seek to impose on public service workers throughout Germany), referred to in the media. It concerns much more. If the European Union (Bolkenstein) directives on service regulations are implemented, the privatization of virtually all aspects of public service will rapidly increase. Then anyone can come along and offer rock-bottom wages with no industrial protection or safety standards. Things will really get bad.

“That not only applies to public service, but also to many craftsmen who already have difficulties making ends meet. Every plumber or electrician needs work, and there is already enormous pressure today.”

The strike has met with broad public support. Meyer spoke of a delegation from a nearby engine works who came to express their solidarity with the strikers. Workers have also experienced broad support from acquaintances and friends.

“There is a widespread feeling,” he said, “that one can no longer tolerate what is going on.” The situation was different some years ago. Then skepticism and the fear for one’s own job outweighed everything else. “Now the readiness to strike is once again very widespread.”

This support for the strike is bound up with the fact that fresh rounds of redundancies and the dismantling of social gains are everyday events. “Formerly, most businessmen and the big concerns reinvested a part of their profits in their companies to develop production and establish reasonable working conditions for those employed. Today it is completely different. Today money is only extracted.

“When just a few days ago Volkswagen announced the elimination of 20,000 jobs, VW shares soared—that is completely abnormal. But it is the same thing at Telekom, Opel, AEG in Nuremberg. Who will buy the cars or washing machines if ever more people are unemployed and wages continued to drop?”

When asked his opinion on the strike tactics adopted by the union, which has called only 60,000 of the union’s total of 2 million members to ballot for a strike and has sought to decentralize strike actions, Meyer answered: “I do not want to be pinned down to an opinion. I do not know exactly what tactics are being pursued by the central strike committee, but it would be naturally better to develop a very broad movement. If they force us to give in, the repercussions will be bad. Not only will work time be extended to well over 40 hours, it will also be much more difficult for the union.”

A Croatian worker joined in the discussion, saying loudly: “This is all far too weak and harmless! We should march on the town hall with clubs in hand.” When it was pointed out that the police also had clubs and clubs were not enough to solve the problems confronting workers, a discussion commenced over political questions.

The government was watching the strike very carefully, Meyer declared, but he was pretty sure it would not back down.

Speaking of all of the major political parties, he said, “They are not interested in our problems. They have completely different interests and only listen to what the business executives have to say.” He added that this applied to the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

When asked to explain the close links between the unions and the SPD, Meyer and his colleagues did not answer. But there was general agreement that the most important conclusion from the fact that all of the political parties and the unions had made a sharp turn to the right was the necessity to form a new party which uncompromisingly represented workers’ interests.

Frank Fischer, 42, has worked for the sanitation department for 24 years. He compared today’s situation with the strike 14 years previously, and said: “Today the situation is much more serious. There is much more at stake this time. Perhaps one can say we are standing here on behalf of many others.”

Frank Jung, 39, said, “If it goes on like this, in a year there

will be civil war!” He noted that politicians continually said that one had a responsibility to found a family and bring children into the world. “I have an 18-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter. I can say only that if I had known 20 years ago what was going to happen I would not have had children. It is hardly possible to support a family, never mind higher education.

“If you ask me about the government, then I have only one word: ‘criminals.’ And that applies to all of them—irrespective of which party. I can no longer listen to their speeches. Promises that there will be more training places, better training and everything else. And what does the government do? Exactly the opposite.

“There is all this talk of responsibility—individual responsibility. But what the government is doing is completely irresponsible. They can bring about the greatest misery, but take responsibility for nothing, exactly like the employers. They look out only for themselves, then there is generosity, if without limits.”

Margarete Hagemester, 36, is the single parent of an 11-year-old daughter. “When I began working here at the end of 1999 I worked four hours, now I work six. But whoever works part-time usually has to carry the workload of a full-time job. Formerly I was employed in the private sector and earned nearly twice as much. Now we have to make do with a minimal income. There is no possibility of making large-scale purchases or taking vacations. We have not even taken daily showers for a long time.

“I think everybody should strike—everybody in public services and also in the private sector. The government does not understand any other language. They are on their own trip and are just working to feather their own nests. And the SPD is no exception. When I see Ole von Beust (the Christian Democratic mayor of Hamburg) I see them all. He always turns up in his fine suits, but does not have a clue about the problems and needs of an ordinary family.

“In addition to my work here I am also a teacher, because the schools have no more money and an increasing number of school hours are being lost. Recently at a parents’ evening it was decided that parents should train themselves in certain teaching subjects. Work folders were put together. Besides being a teacher and a public worker, I am still a charwoman, washer woman, cook and so on. Ole von Beust and the other politicians do not have the slightest notion of such things.”



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