

Sixth week of German public sector strike

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The strike by German public sector workers, which has now entered its sixth week, is taking an increasingly confrontational form. Last weekend negotiations between the public service trade union Verdi and the state tariff association (TdL) were broken off without any progress and postponed indefinitely.

During the collective bargaining negotiations last Saturday the chief state negotiator, the finance minister for Lower Saxony, Hartmut Möllring (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), issued an ultimatum to the union and allowed the talks to collapse.

According to press reports, Möllring told union representatives that the main demand raised by employers—for an extension of the work week from the current level of 38.5 hours to 40—was not negotiable. In addition he made clear that working times would be extended without union agreement, if the trade unions did not back down.

The confrontational course adopted by Möllring has met with some opposition inside the state tariff association. On Sunday, TdL deputy and Schleswig-Holstein Interior Minister Ralf Stegner (Social Democratic Party, SPD) said on German television he rejected the negotiation style adopted by Möllring, which, Stegner said, was aimed at forcing the trade unions to sign “a declaration of surrender” Together with the social-democratic prime minister of Rheinland-Pfalz, Kurt Beck, Stegner questioned Möllring’s suitability to remain negotiator. Both men demanded the installation of an “impartial mediator” in order to resolve the dispute.

Möllring rejected the criticism, accusing Stegner of disloyalty and demanding his replacement as deputy negotiator. He also rejected the call for a mediator.

On Monday, March 13, the SPD party council warned against any further aggravation of the conflict and SPD leader, Mathias Platzeck, argued in favour of a conciliation procedure. Government spokesman Ulrich William responded by saying that the German chancellor, Angela Merkel (CDU), would not intervene in negotiations. She would, however, advise the opposing sides to rapidly resume talks in order to conclude the dispute. The announcement from the chancellery was widely seen as a rejection by Merkel of any conciliation procedure.

The aggravation of the conflict makes clear that much more is at stake than an extra 18 minutes working time per day and cuts in Christmas and holiday pay. Möllring’s provocative stance is being backed by prominent Union politicians such as the

Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union—CSU), the CDU prime minister of Thuringia, Dieter Althaus, who has demanded a 42-hour working week, and the head of the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP), Guido Westerwelle, who called upon the public sector employers not to give in to the trade union.

Germany’s main employer associations also see the strike as an opportunity not only to teach Verdi a lesson but to inflict a defeat on the trade unions as a whole—to break up the current system of labour relations and impose massive cuts in jobs and social programs, along with rolling back the living standards and working conditions of public employees.

Against this background it is necessary to bluntly point out some basic truths. With or without a mediator this tariff conflict will be used to break up the traditional social structure involving the institutionalized collaboration of the trade unions as a partner for management and industry. Möllring’s announcement that, if necessary, he will impose a deal without a collective agreement, in addition to his lack of interest in any uniform procedure by Germany’s 16 different states, must be seen in connection with legislation now being discussed over the reform of the country’s federalist system.

The package of laws comprising Germany’s federalist reform is aimed at giving individual states more independence from central federal administration in a number of specific areas. Wealthier states have been pushing for such a “reform” for some time in order to encourage competition between states in areas such as education, environmental pollution, etc.

In a second stage of this “reform” the wealthier states want to decouple themselves from their poorer neighbours and abolish the existing compensatory financial arrangements. As a consequence, not only eastern German states that have twice as much unemployment as in the west, but also western states with high unemployment and low social standards, will be left to fend for themselves and the rate of impoverishment in these states will accelerate.

Against a background of intensified competition between states, a nationwide collective agreement for public service employees would only serve as a hindrance.

From this point of view the main argument used by public sector employers, “the piggy bank is empty,” acquires additional significance. On the basis of the principle that one can only pay out on the basis of what one has, why should

someone employed in the poor western state of Saarland or the poor eastern state of Thuringia earn as much as someone working in the wealthier southern states of Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg?

The fact is that state and municipality treasuries have been plundered over previous years by Germany's former SPD-Green government, which lowered taxes for the wealthiest individuals and big enterprises, while increasingly saddling local authorities with the costs involved in the administration of record levels of postwar unemployment.

Möllring's confrontational course is a component part of the offensive begun by prominent business circles in cooperation with the Union parties and the FDP last summer.

When the social attacks—Hartz IV laws and the Agenda 2010—carried out by the government led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) encountered increasing resistance, big business and opposition parties sought to bring to power a government that would unflinchingly implement the course demanded by the employers. This was the purpose behind the new elections called last year. However, as the reactionary aims of the Union parties and the FDP became clear in the course of the election campaign, their electoral support sagged and, despite widespread disillusionment with Schröder, the right wing was unable to form its hoped-for coalition of the Union and FDP.

The grand coalition (CDU-CSU-SPD) that finally emerged is now implementing the same anti-social policy. The SPD has taken over key departments in the new government coalition and plays a leading role in implementing these reactionary policies. A recent example was the call by Labour and Social Minister Franz Müntefering (SPD) for an extension of the number of years a worker must labour before retirement and attacks on pensions.

The fact that a few SPD politicians have criticized Möllring's provocative negotiation tactics changes nothing. Three German states—Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt—have elections at the end of the month and the SPD is only doing what it did during the federal election campaign: attacking anti-social policies, although it has itself been a prime mover of such measures.

It should also be noted that some of the most powerful figures from the public sector employers' side are Social Democrats like the negotiator for German municipalities and mayor of Mannheim, Gerhard Widder. Widder has employed private garbage collectors as strike-breakers in his city and called upon other mayors to do the same. He never tires of declaring that in the end the strike will have only one result: the intensified privatization of local services.

The Verdi leadership has nothing to offer in response to the attacks and blackmailing by the employers. Apart from Chairman Frank Bsirske, who is a member of the Greens, all of the top Verdi functionaries enjoy the closest links with the SPD. At no time did the Verdi leadership seriously oppose the attacks launched by the former SPD-Green government,

although this government in particular was responsible for the steady decline in the living standards and working conditions of public employees. Even the few paltry protests that Verdi organized against SPD-Green government policies only served as a safety valve, enabling growing popular opposition to be kept under control.

The loss of jobs that has taken place over the past number of years, which is now deplored and criticized by many Verdi functionaries, was in fact implemented with the agreement and in close cooperation with the union's own personnel councils. Innumerable workplace agreements stipulating social welfare cuts carry the signature of Verdi functionaries. Last year the trade union negotiated a collective agreement that introduced low-wage categories and practically froze salaries until 2007. Verdi also agreed to an auxiliary clause on work time regulation that made it possible for the employers to set aside the existing collective agreement.

In the present strike the main concern for Verdi is to stress the role of the trade union as a factor for stability and constitutional action. In response to Möllring's obstructive stance Bsirske warned that a break-up of the TdL system would mean that in the future employees in individual states would undertake protests with their own demands. This could lead to "house-to-house fighting," he warned, which nobody could control.

At the same time Verdi has referred to the recent collective wage agreement made in Hamburg in order to stress its readiness to arrive at a compromise.

After three weeks of strike a deal was struck in Hamburg whereby an increase in working time will be graduated according to income, family status, and age. Employees in the lower wage categories who are younger than 50 and have children under 12 retain a 38.5 hour week, but this changes as soon as the children exceed the age of 12. Then the working week rises to 39 hours, and for higher wage categories to 39.5 or even 40 hours.

Weekly work times drop to 38 hours only for those workers over 50 in the lower wage categories. At the same time this is precisely the category of jobs that will be hit hardest and first by job cuts made possible by the extra hours worked by other categories of workers.

Only 42 percent of the Verdi membership agreed to the "Hamburg compromise." However, this did not prevent the Verdi leadership from accepting the deal and recommending it as the basis for agreement in other states.



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