

Strikebreakers in the trade union leadership

Germany: Verdi union boss attacks striking doctors

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For the past seven weeks, public service employees have been on strike to stave off an extension of unpaid working time and a general deterioration of their working conditions. The current industrial action has become the longest strike in the German public service sector since the 1930s.

When doctors from state and university hospitals also went on strike two weeks ago to fight for shorter regulated working hours and a salary increase of 30 percent, the Verdi service industry trade union saw no reason to regard their action as a significant chance to support and widen the strike front. Although the doctors' strike was directed against the Tariff Board of German States (TdL), the same employer confronted by Verdi, Verdi boss Frank Bsirske sharply attacked the doctors' strike and emphasised several times that he had "absolutely no sympathy" for "such an exaggerated salary claim."

Last Tuesday, employers made a new offer to the Marburg Federation (MB) doctors' association. The board of the MB reacted bitterly, describing the offer as totally inadequate. The MB's tariff expert, Lutz Hammerschlag, even calculated that the Tariff Board's offer could mean a loss in income of up to 4 percent. On the other hand, Verdi criticised the offer as an "excessive concession to the doctors."

Bsirske openly supported the statement of Frank Stöhr, the chairman of the German Public Servants' Association (dbb). Stöhr compared the offer made to his members with the increase sought by the doctors, saying: "The head of the TdL, Hartmut Möllering, doesn't want to spend a cent on the rest of the hospital workers and the public servants. But, when it comes to the doctors' Marburg Federation, he's ready to hand

out." Although they know better, Stöhr and Bsirske claimed that the employers' offer would amount to a 30 to 45 percent rise in doctors' salaries, and this increase would have to be paid for by cuts in the income of nurses and caring staff.

Bsirske and Stöhr's ranting against the demands of hospital doctors is a repulsive form of strikebreaking that must be categorically rejected.

The claim that hospital doctors are overprivileged and are making exorbitant demands is a malicious slander. Anyone familiar with what goes on in hospitals knows that, following many years of study, young doctor assistants are forced to work themselves to the point of physical exhaustion—often 60 to 80 hours a week—and even then, usually without being able to earn enough to start and maintain a family.

If anyone is privileged, it is the top trade union bureaucrats, who have pushed through truly exorbitant manager salaries for themselves.

Verdi refers on its web site to Jack London's much quoted and rather well-worn description of a strikebreaker or scab: "A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water logged brain and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, the scab carries a tumor of rotten principles ..."

However, there is a great difference between a desperate, heavily indebted worker who takes part in strikebreaking after being on strike for weeks—condemnable though this is, of course—and a well-paid trade union bureaucrat who denounces the justified claims of other workers. Nowhere are a lack of principles, thick-headedness and debased souls so widespread as in the offices of the trade unions.

There are many reasons why Bsirske is opposing the doctors' strike by putting himself forward as a strikebreaker. The doctors' demand for a 30 percent pay rise exposes the pitifully limited extent of Verdi's own claim, which tries in a purely defensive way to maintain the status quo on the issue of working hours. And even on that issue, Verdi is prepared to make endless compromises.

Bsirske's argument that there is not enough money available in the hospitals and the public service budgets for a 30 percent claim is most revealing. It exposes the fact that, for him and his colleagues in the trade union leadership, what is crucial is not the requirements and interests of the employees, but the maintenance of the existing economic order. Bsirske completely accepts the arguments of the public service employers, who point to the empty municipal and state coffers at every opportunity.

While state coffers were being plundered—namely, by the taxation policies of the former Social Democratic-Green Party federal government, which carried out a massive redistribution of wealth in favour of big businesses and the rich—there was nothing to be heard from Bsirske and the Verdi leadership. But now the empty coffers are exploited to blackmail public service workers and denounce striking hospital doctors as social parasites.

Bsirske is a typical member of the Greens. Like his Green Party friend, Joschka Fischer, who continually displayed his “corkscrew soul” during his transformation from Frankfurt street fighter to foreign minister in the service of German imperialism, Bsirske has completely dedicated himself to the maintenance of the bourgeois order. Before taking over the leadership of Verdi four years ago and in the course of his career pursuits with the Greens, he had risen to the post of head of the staffing department in state capital of Hannover, where he promptly dismantled 1,000 of the 16,000 jobs in the Hannover city administration.

No one should be deceived. Bsirske's attacks on the doctors' strike form the prelude to a devastating sell-out of his own members at the end of a seven-week-long strike. Since the major negotiators of the public service employers have dug their heels in and shown their resolve not to yield to the unions, Verdi has put the industrial action into reverse wherever it can. Although there exists widespread readiness to fight

among union organised as well as non-organised workers, Verdi is preparing to make a complete capitulation.

Public service employers, the government and major business associations intend exploiting an eventual defeat of the trade unions to pave the way for an unbridled offensive against the public service and other sectors of the economy. All remaining social rights and gains made from previous struggles are to be smashed and abolished.

This is why Bsirske's assault on the doctors' strike has to be seen in its wider context. That the chairman of the largest of Germany's trade unions, still claiming 2.3 million members, is prepared to defy the most elementary principle of the workers movement—the principle of solidarity—is neither merely a wrong move nor a personal weakness. It is an expression of a fundamental transformation in the function of all trade unions.

When air mechanics at Northwest Airlines struck in the US last summer, the company managers enlisted the aid of the AFL-CIO association of unions to organise hundreds of strikebreakers and thereby crush the strike. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The issue has to be put plainly. The US trade unions as workers' organisations are now dead and can never be revived. This has been proved by the strikebreaking, undertaken by other trade unions against the strike of the air mechanics at Northwest Airlines.”

Bsirske's statements make it obvious that a similar degeneration of the trade unions has also taken place in Germany.



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