

The political tasks in the German public service strike

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A strike by public sector workers has spread throughout most German states and is about to enter its fourth week. As every striking worker knows, this struggle is about much more than just the immediate fight against the attempt by local governments to extend the working day by 18 minutes.

In the last decade and a half, 2.2 million jobs have been destroyed in public service—one in three. Workloads during this period have continually increased while wages have been cut.

Utilising European Union guidelines for public sector services, which have set the basis for the implementation of a cheap labour regime, public service employers are now attempting to push through massive social cuts. The move goes hand in hand with the wave of mass sackings underway in private industry: AEG, VW, Siemens, Deutsche Telekom—the list goes on and on. Major corporations have long played one factory against another, while simultaneously establishing operations in cheap labour countries. Now the axe is to be taken to the public sector.

The striking workers are in a difficult situation.

Behind the State Tariff Community (TdL) and the local employers' associations (KAV) stands the German government, business associations, every German parliamentary party, as well as the majority of the media. All of them support the offensive of the public service employers against employees, or, as they like to call it, the “reforms” or “modernisation.”

On the other side, the leadership of the Verdi public service trade union explicitly rejects a confrontation with the government and is restricting the strike to this or that individual protest or other activity, thereby eroding the strength of the striking of the workers, while at the same time using every opportunity to make overtures for compromise. Under these conditions, the strike can be quickly defeated and used by the employers to step up their attacks.

The last public service strike 14 years ago involved more than 300,000 workers—ten times as many as are involved today. In spite of these numbers, the government under conservative Chancellor Helmut Kohl did not relent and the trade union leadership ended up implementing a rotten compromise against the will of the majority of its members. This sell-out precipitated a wave of sackings and social cutbacks, setting the stage for the current strike.

It is a welcome sign that during many recent mass meetings, the demand has been made to widen the strike. However, trade union militancy alone will not suffice. The public sector workers and the working class in general face fundamental political tasks. Even if

the immediate fight against the lengthening of the workweek is won, the problems they confront will not be resolved.

The federal government is committed to “cleaning up” the public household at all levels—federal, state and local—and placing the burden on the backs of the employees. Finance Minister Peter Steinbrück has long made commitments to the European Commission to carry out this task.

As for the Verdi trade union, it is tied by a thousand strings to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and in many cases to the conservative Union parties too. It organised the strike above all to demonstrate its ability to bring social conflicts under control and to act as a mediator. Since its founding five years ago, Verdi has lost over one hundred thousand members. This has not only threatened Verdi's influence, but also the income of the trade union bureaucracy. The leadership therefore felt obliged to organise this latest strike. However, it would never broaden the struggle to an extent that it would place the government in any danger.

The chairman of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, is actually a member of the Green Party and not the SPD. This doesn't change anything—in fact, it casts additional light on the role of the Greens in the offensive against the workers. Founded at the end of the 1970s in opposition to the policies of the SPD under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, the Greens have moved consistently to the right over the last two decades.

During their time in the coalition government under Gerhard Schröder (SPD), the former pacifists supported the NATO war against Serbia and the sending of German troops to the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Africa. On social questions, they usually stand to the right of the SPD. They saw their role in government as strengthening the hand of the SPD so that the latter would not give in to the protests against the program of welfare cuts embodied in the Hartz IV laws. It is no accident that there is a strong wing within the Greens that is preparing for a coalition government with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), if the current coalition between the SPD and Union parties breaks down.

Irrespective of whether they are linked to the SPD or the Greens, the trade unions in the public sector have close relations with the employers. Many Verdi functionaries have used their party positions to gain seats on local councils and in state parliaments and attempt to advance their party careers through the unions, and their trade union careers through the parties.

Frank Bsirske is typical in this respect. He used his position in

the Greens to rise to the head of personnel in the city of Hanover, and took less than ten years to destroy 1,000 out of 16,000 jobs in the Lower Saxony capital. Even today, as the head of Verdi, Bsirske demands “more willingness to change,” citing “changed general conditions” in the public service. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper wrote that “when he gets agitated about what has to be done, he drops terms like ‘customer orientation,’ ‘increased efficiency,’ and ‘process optimisation.’” The paper then commented, “Sometimes this sounds more like a restructuring manager than a striking trade unionist.”

Verdi is acting as though the national government is not playing a major role part in this strike—as if the struggle is only about workplace agreements with the states and local councils. However, this is false. It is no accident that the instigators in the state governments went on the offensive just a few months after the formation of the “grand coalition” government between the SPD and Union parties. The government of Angela Merkel was brought to power to redouble the social attacks that had stalled under the Schröder government due to widespread popular resistance.

After seven years in which the SPD and Greens had gone far beyond previous conservative governments in implementing social cutbacks, popular opposition took an increasingly acute form. The SPD lost substantial numbers of votes in 11 consecutive state elections. Under these conditions, Gerhard Schröder and then SPD chairman Franz Müntefering gave in to the pressure coming from the employers’ camp, which was clambering for new elections. Schröder and Müntefering prematurely dissolved parliament, in contravention of the German constitution.

Not one trade union protested against this manoeuvre, nor mobilised its membership. After the Union and Free Democratic Party (FDP) unexpectedly failed to win enough votes to form a government, the SPD offered its services to the CDU to help push through the discredited policies advocated by the employer associations. The SPD proceeded to take over the key ministerial positions in the new government to implement the next stage in social cutbacks.

Since then, Labour Minister and vice-chancellor Franz Müntefering has announced the addition of further cuts to the Hartz IV welfare programs and a raising of the retirement age. Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück is preparing further tax cuts for large companies and high income earners, while the value-added tax is to be increased by three percentage points next year. As for Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU), he is organising to deploy the army inside Germany for the World Cup—a move prohibited by the German constitution.

Through their connections to the SPD, the trade unions are directly implicated in the actions of the government. It is no accident that the German trade union association, the DGB, announced its willingness to cooperate with the coalition government immediately after its formation.

The public service strike—the first since the coming to power of the grand coalition—must be understood in this context. The strike must be the starting point of an intensification of the struggle against Hartz IV and all other attacks that the Schröder government started and which are now being continued under the coalition led by Merkel and Müntefering.

This requires a political break with the SPD and a new political orientation.

Many workers have already turned their backs on the SPD, not infrequently after decades as members of the party. Discussions with striking workers have revealed a broad-based disgust over the SPD’s right-wing policies. However, a break with the SPD requires a turn to a new political programme and the building of a new party. These are the most important tasks.

Two considerations must be placed at the centre of this project: First, an international perspective that strives for the unity and cooperation of the European and international working class. Second, a socialist perspective directed against the capitalist system.

Not a single problem that workers confront today can be resolved in isolation within the confines of national borders. Companies—not only large corporations but also local council businesses—have long followed an international strategy. In every European country, workers are faced with the same problems but are pitted harder and harder against each other.

The trade unions have separated and isolated every struggle of workers. Instead of building a European-wide movement against the European Union, the unions aim to form an alliance with their national governments and thereby split and divide workers along national lines. Verdi is going so far as to divide its own membership. Even though Deutsche Telekom has announced the destruction of 32,000 jobs, Verdi is not undertaking any measures to bring its Telekom members into the current strike.

This policy of the trade unions is bound up with their fundamental agreement with the capitalist profit system. When the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe broke up, predictions were also heard from the unions about a new golden age of capitalism. However, rapid economic and social decline resulted instead. One only has to cast a glance at the new eastern German states, or at Eastern Europe or the states that comprise the former Soviet Union to see the hollowness of all talk about a triumph of the market economy.

Every political party that accepts the framework of the capitalist profit system is destined to failure from the start. A way forward can be found only when these problems are examined at their roots—when society is organized on the principle that the needs of the population override the profit interests of business.

The most important instrument in building such a political offensive is the World Socialist Web Site, which appears in more than ten languages and systematically works to develop an international socialist party. We turn to all strikers and everyone else who supports this struggle: Take part in the work of the WSWS! This is the only way out of the dead end of social democracy and trade unionism, which repeatedly leads to new disappointments and defeats.



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