

The logic of trade union politics

“Left” publications in Germany defend strike-breaking by Verdi union leaders

Ulrich Rippert
29 June 2006

The three-month strike of German physicians employed by university clinics, which ended in mid-June with a partial victory, witnessed one of the most blatant examples of strike-breaking in postwar German history. The doctors’ strike was systematically attacked and sabotaged by Verdi (*Vereinigte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft*), the public service union, and its chairman Franz Bsirske.

During the strike Bsirske and other members of the Verdi executive committee warned of “excessive concessions to the medical profession” and tried to whip up nurses and other hospital personnel against the striking physicians. Verdi functionaries claimed that “the privileges of the physicians” were being paid for by other workers because the “budget available for hospitals” was fixed and one section of employees could only receive more at the expense of the rest.

When the physicians refused to be deterred by Verdi’s tactics, the trade union went a step further. Verdi agreed to its own collective agreement for the physicians, although the overwhelming majority of the 22,000 hospital doctors are not members of that union, but belong to another association, the Marburg Federation.

In virtually all respects, the agreement reached by Verdi lagged behind the offer made by the public employers’ association—an offer that had already been rejected by the striking physicians. Nevertheless, Verdi and the public employers issued an ultimatum to the doctors that they call off their strike and submit to the imposed contract. The union bureaucracy, however, had no success. The physicians continued their strike and eventually secured a better agreement.

Rarely has the conversion of the trade unions into a form of police agency for the employers - a development that can be observed worldwide—been so blatant as in the case of Verdi and the striking physicians. In turn, the stance taken by Verdi created substantial difficulties for numerous “left” radical groups that hang onto the coattails of the trade union bureaucracy.

In particular, this is the case with the monthly magazine *Sozialismus* [Socialism], which has been published since the end of the 1960s, is regarded as a mouthpiece for left-leaning trade union officials, and has recently played a central role in the evolution of the organisation Election Alternative Labour and Social Justice (WASG).

In its June issue, *Sozialismus* co-editor Michael Wendl takes up the Verdi wage agreement in detail. Although he frankly describes Verdi’s hostile attitude toward the physicians, Wendl cannot bring himself to admit that the union was guilty of strike-breaking and makes no criticism of Verdi’s settlement on behalf of its public

service members. He states that the “very moderate increase in physician’s incomes” negotiated by the doctors’ association was a “success” for Verdi because it resulted in “no redistribution at the cost of other occupational groups.”

Moderate wage increases—i.e., the suppression of legitimate demands—are now seen as a requirement for solidarity amongst workers! Up until now, this was the sort of propaganda indulged in exclusively by lobbyists for the employers.

Wendl calls it a decision of “high symbolic importance” that “the regulations for physicians were concluded with Verdi and not the Marburg Federation.” One can only conclude from this statement that Wendl supports Verdi’s strike-breaking role.

The magazine *Avanti* [Forward], which is affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat, takes a very similar political stance to that of *Sozialismus*, but is even more blunt. *Avanti* accuses the hospital physicians of maintaining “group privileges” and acting as if “they were the only ones doing good work for insufficient payment.”

Avanti continues: “As long as the medical staff employed in hospitals fail to realise that they are just one amongst many—and equally important—hospital professions, so long as they are not prepared to fight—like the 600 doctors who are Verdi members and not in the Marburg Federation—together with all employees for an overall improvement in hospital conditions, then their actions are concentrated on their own group interests and are thus politically reactionary.”

Franz Bsirske could not have put it better: As long as the physicians do not subordinate themselves to the dictates of Verdi, their fight is “politically reactionary.”

The fact is that the Marburg Federation broke with Verdi some years ago, because physicians were no longer willing to tolerate the wage cuts and miserable working conditions negotiated by Verdi. However, instead of welcoming the militancy shown by the physicians—which is currently continuing in the form of a fresh strike by 70,000 doctors employed in district hospitals—as the basis for an offensive in the entire public service, *Sozialismus* and *Avanti* denounce the doctors for not capitulating to the dictates of the Verdi bureaucracy.

Wendl graphically describes the sort of manoeuvres employed by Verdi against the Marburg Federation. He writes that in order to win back the right to negotiate the wage scale for the doctors, Verdi offered the employers “in return a relatively cheap settlement.” In other words, to ensure that the employers were prepared to recognise their monopoly over negotiations in the public service, Verdi agreed to longer working hours, performance-oriented low wages and

numerous clauses undermining conditions for the entire public service.

That is not sufficiently foul, however, as to prevent *Sozialismus* and *Avanti* from defending Verdi's right to control over wage negotiations. Both magazines make a fetish out of the unity of the public service trade union, although it has long since been a straitjacket for its members. At one time, labour disputes by other sections of workers were looked upon by individual trade unions on strike as a means of strengthening their position in a dispute. Now, in the name of a unified dues base, Verdi is seeking to suppress any initiative and independent movement of the working class.

How is one to account for the fact that publications such as *Sozialismus* and *Avanti*, which have long regarded themselves as organs of "left" trade unionism and were prepared within this framework to make some criticism of the trade union bureaucracy, now line up so unreservedly behind the strike-breaking role of Verdi?

Close personal connections to the trade union bureaucracy undoubtedly plays an important role. The WASG, which has close links to the editorial board of *Sozialismus*, recruits predominantly from the corrupt environment of the trade union bureaucracy.

However, of more importance than these personal connections is the political perspective that *Sozialismus* and *Avanti* represent. Both assume that the development of the working class to socialism can only come about via the trade unions. They regard class struggle as first and foremost *trade union* struggle and reject a *political* movement that seeks to free itself from social-democracy and the trade unions. For them, a fight against the paralysing influence of the trade union bureaucracy and social-democracy is "sectarianism."

This perspective has its own inevitable logic. As the trade unions lose increasing numbers of members due to their right-wing policies, *Sozialismus* and *Avanti* respond by moving closer to the trade union bureaucracy. For them, the increasing opposition to the sclerotic union apparatuses is not looked upon as the first step towards an independent movement to be encouraged and provided political orientation, but as attack on the unions that they have glorified.

This explains their reaction to the physicians' strike. Behind the refusal of young doctors to tolerate unbearable conditions in the hospitals and the miserable wages dictated by Verdi, these magazines see only an attack on trade union unity and the defence of vested interests by the Marburg Federation, instead of the beginning of a rebellion against social conditions that subordinate every aspect of life to the profit principle. This rebellion must be politically developed, expanded and guided in a socialist direction—a task that is only possible in a struggle against the debilitating influence of the trade union bureaucracy.

The entire historical experience of the socialist workers' movement shows that the trade unions have continually tended politically toward the right, and in times of open class warfare switched to the side of reaction.

For a large part of her political life, Rosa Luxemburg, one the greatest German Marxists, was banned from speaking at ostensibly socialist-led trade union congresses. During the debate over the "mass strike," which took place precisely a century ago, the hatred of the trade union apparatus for the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement, including Luxemburg, took almost hysterical forms. In September 1906, the trade union leaders implemented a resolution at the Mannheim SPD (Social Democratic Party) congress demanding that the party executive committee consult in future on all important questions with the leadership of the trade unions.

Looking back, it is clear that this decision, in the long run, was to have the most devastating consequences—e.g., the agreement by the German SPD to the granting of war credits in August 1914 and finally, in April 1933, the offer by the German trade union federation to co-operate with the Hitler regime.

This continual shift to the right by the trade unions is not primarily the result of personal corruption, but, in the final analysis, flows from the character of the trade unions themselves. They represent the working class in the economic sphere, as salesmen for their labour power, for which they seek to win the highest price possible.

In 1998, in a lecture on the history of the trade unions, David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, explained: "Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt an essentially hostile attitude toward the class struggle.

"Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labour-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obliged to guarantee that their members supply their labour-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, 'The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.'

"The defence of legality means the suppression of the class struggle, which, in the very nature of things, means that the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated. Herein lies the contradiction upon which trade unionism flounders."

North concluded: "There has been no illusion more tragic, especially for socialists, than that which imagined the unions as dependable, let alone inevitable, allies in the struggle against capitalism."

The analysis made in this lecture eight years ago has been confirmed in every respect. The lurch to the right and decline of the trade unions is a general international phenomenon. It is possible to observe the process of trade unions closing ranks with right-wing, conservative governments throughout Europe, together with their intervention as a force for political order against an increasingly hostile population.

In France, the trade unions reacted to mass demonstrations held against the dismantling of job protection by undertaking negotiations with Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, thereby strengthening the most right-wing layers of the Gaullist movement. In Italy, the trade unions unconditionally back the government of Romano Prodi, whose political agenda is similar to that of the conservative-social democratic coalition in Germany headed by Angela Merkel. And in Brazil, the so-called "left" trade union leader Lula, who was also praised as a new hope by *Sozialismus*, has established a right-wing government that enjoys the full confidence of the International Monetary Fund.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact