

Germany: Public service union functions as agency of the state

Sybille Fuchs, Ulrich Rippert
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On May 29, the German public service union Verdi officially called off its 14-week strike, the longest work stoppage in Germany's post-war history. According to the head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, 83.5 percent of members voted to accept the contract that had been agreed ten days before by the union and all of the state governments, with the exception of Hesse and Berlin.

The new contract imposes major concessions in working conditions. Verdi conducted the strike in such a limited and passive manner that it demoralised the union membership, rather than mobilising them to maximize the pressure on the employers.

In the end, the membership vote was something of an irrelevancy. In the past, the union's rules prescribed a minimum level of 25 percent agreement before a new contract could be accepted. But in 1994, when nearly eighty percent voted against a contract, the union leadership simply ignored the ballot and then removed the minimum requirement from the union rules.

Since Verdi's negotiating committee had already voted by a large majority to accept the new contract (75 in favour, 13 against, 5 abstentions), it would have taken effect even if the majority of striking members had rejected it.

The leadership around Bsirske had mobilised the union's entire propaganda apparatus to talk up the new contract. According to the union's press statement, the new contract had "put a stop" to attempts by the employers to "unilaterally extend working hours." It had, moreover, "successfully defended" the principle of one contract for all workers. A union flyer boasted that "the agreement with the state governments has strengthened the public service! Solidarity has prevailed!"

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Verdi has signed a contract covering 800,000 public service workers that opens the door to unpaid additional work and cuts in benefits, and also allows for regional differences that give the employers ample latitude for playing off workers against one another to force them to accept further concessions. The agreement will, above all, enable the state governments to implement "flexible" labour conditions throughout the public service.

The contract includes the following:

* Longer working hours

The employers had already rescinded the old contract in March 2004 and arbitrarily imposed poorer conditions for new employees. The work week was extended from 38.5 hours to 40 hours in Lower Saxony, 41 hours in North Rhine Westphalia and as high as 42 hours in Bavaria. Holiday pay was completely eliminated and the Christmas bonus cut by around 30 percent.

In future, working hours will be calculated on the basis of a complicated formula in each state. As a result, the effective number of hours worked per week will be 39.73 in Bavaria and 39.72 in North Rhine Westphalia. In the other states it will be slightly lower. This is the reality behind the union's boast that it had blocked the attempt to raise the work week to 40 hours.

For the employers, the regional differences in working hours represent an important step toward the break-up of nationally agreed conditions. From 2008, working hours will be agreed purely at the state level.

Verdi has also agreed to special clauses allowing hospital management to temporarily cut wages at facilities that claim to be in a critical financial condition. This could lead to average wage losses of up to 10 percent. It will, moreover, allow hospitals that were hit by the strike to push the costs onto the backs of the workers.

* Cuts in real wages

Public service workers will not receive a pay increase for two years, and then they will get only 2.9 percent. Inflation and a 3 percent increase in the value added tax from January 2007 will result in a further erosion of their income.

The new contract negotiated by Verdi completely undermines the ongoing strike by hospital doctors. Although most of these physicians are not organised in Verdi, the union is insisting that they be covered by the agreement.

Verdi chief Bsirske expressly solidarized himself with the efforts of the employers to force hospital doctors to submit. He criticized the Marburger Bund, the main body representing hospital doctors, for rejecting the new contract and supported the employers' attempts to force it upon them.

"The unity of collective bargaining has been restored in the hospitals," he said, adding that he welcomed the fact that the employers saw things in the same way.

The doctors' contract that Verdi signed is far worse than the one the employers had already offered the striking physicians, and which they had rejected as insufficient.

The Marburger Bund has listed more than ten reasons why the Verdi agreement is unacceptable to the strikers. For example, young physicians, who already earn very little, must accept a loss in earnings of over 8 percent; the levels of overtime and on-call pay are unacceptable; and so on.

Bsirske and the Verdi leadership have cynically justified their strike-breaking by arguing they are for solidarity and unity. Verdi claims it has succeeded in recovering the right to negotiate on behalf of the physicians and thereby prevented a division between different sections of hospital staff. According to Verdi, the Marburger Bund is not a real union and is simply trying to secure privileges for the physicians at the expense of other hospital staff.

Some weeks ago, Bsirske warned against "overblown concessions to the medical profession" and had tried to whip up nurses and other hospital employees against the striking doctors. Verdi functionaries claim that "the privileges of the physicians" were at the expense of other staff because of limits in "the available hospital budgets."

This demagoguery recalls the lying arguments used more than two decades ago to justify the destruction of PATCO, the American air traffic controllers' union. At that time the other American unions refused to defend the controllers against the Reagan administration, which sacked all

the strikers, arrested strike leaders and financially ruined the union. The smashing of PATCO opened the floodgates for a frontal assault on wages and social conditions that continues to the present day.

Verdi's agitation against the physicians goes against the most elementary principles of working class solidarity. In reality, the demands of the hospital doctors are entirely justified. The time when such physicians represented a privileged grouping is long past. Apart from senior consultants, whose remuneration is regulated separately, the vast majority of hospital physicians today are forced to work under very difficult conditions.

It is not uncommon for years of internships and temporary posts to follow a protracted period of study and the accumulation of massive education-related debts. Even those who manage to secure a permanent post are confronted with cutbacks, long hours of overtime, unpaid on-call duty, and the burdens of administrative work.

The demands of the physicians, who have been on strike for weeks, have nothing to do with privileges. The initial demand for a 30 percent salary increase (which has since been sharply reduced) was calculated to compensate for earlier pay reductions, including cuts in the Christmas bonus and holiday pay. The doctors are demanding fair compensation, regulated working hours and decent social standards—things that were previously the norm in other sections of the public service.

It is not the striking doctors who are sowing divisions among hospital staff, but Verdi, with its refusal to fight for reasonable pay and social benefits for all public service workers.

What infuriates Bsirske and the Verdi functionaries about the physicians strike is that it exposes their own treachery. The doctors are not prepared to accept the constant cuts in social provisions that Verdi has signed up to in one collective agreement after another. Although the Marburger Bund is a rather conservative organisation, which is not seeking to change the social order, its justified wage demand is upsetting the close collaboration between Verdi and the employers.

The union bureaucrats, who easily move back and forth between their union posts and government and administrative jobs, long ago ceased representing the interests of their own members. Verdi regards its role as policing the work force on behalf of the state, and suppressing any and all who dare to oppose the union's diktats.

Verdi accepts the public employers' argument that the coffers are empty, and therefore "nothing more is available." Their friends in government at the federal, state and local levels in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party and the Left Party have gutted the public service through continual privatisations and generous tax breaks for big business. The demand of the physicians on many demonstrations—"If you want a high-quality health care system, you have to pay those who work in it fairly"—is anathema to them.

Throughout the entire Verdi strike, the union leadership never attacked the grand coalition government in Berlin or questioned the SPD or the Christian Democrats about their attacks on the unemployed. Quite the opposite, Verdi—and the union bureaucracy as a whole—is interested in seeking closer links with the government and the Christian Democrats.

It is characteristic that Verdi has allied itself against the striking physicians with the chairman of the public service employers, Hartmut Möllring (Christian Democratic Union—CDU). Möllring represents the right wing in the CDU, for whom the attacks by the Merkel government on social provisions do not go far enough.

These closer links with the CDU were apparent at the congress of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), which was held recently in Berlin. The delegates, of whom more than two thirds belonged to IG Metall and Verdi, removed the long-serving social expert Ursula Engelen-Kefer from the executive committee, electing in her place CDU member Ingrid Sehrbrock as deputy DGB chair. For the first time in 24 years, a CDU member occupies the second highest post in the DGB.

Engelen-Kefer is a member of the SPD executive who has supported its policies for many decades, but her sporadic criticism of social evils had made her an annoyance to many in the SPD and trade union leadership. The election of Sehrbrock expressly serves to develop collaboration with the government of CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Das Handelsblatt, Germany's leading financial daily, commented with the words: "The DGB wants to document its willingness to engage in dialogue with the grand coalition and, in particular, with the CDU/CSU."

While an increasing number of working people reject the anti-social policies of the government, and the government increasingly limits democratic rights in order to implement welfare cuts and mass poverty, the unions rush to its aid. In view of the increasing social tensions and conflicts, they offer themselves as a factor for order and call for a stronger state.

"We need a strong state," said the chairman of IG Metall, Jürgen Peters, on the day of Sehrbrock's election in the DGB. Peters justified this by pointing to the responsibilities of the state for the social safety net. But the call for a stronger state and for closer cooperation with the government has its own logic.

The globalization of production and the hegemony of the international financial markets over all aspects of the economy have robbed the unions of the possibility of negotiating social concessions within the national framework. They react by moving closer to the government. They take over responsibility for the defence of Germany as a production location and for improving Germany's "international competitiveness" by supporting welfare cuts, dividing workers and playing them off against each other internationally.

At the end of the 1930s, Leon Trotsky described the fusion of the unions with the state power, at a time when globalization was far less developed. He wrote at that time, "There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power... In the eyes of the bureaucracy of the trade union movement the chief task lies in 'freeing' the state from the embrace of capitalism, in weakening its dependence on trusts, in pulling it over to their side. This position is in complete harmony with the social position of the labour aristocracy and the labour bureaucracy, who fight for a crumb in the share of superprofits of imperialist capitalism. The labour bureaucrats do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the 'democratic' state how reliable and indispensable they are in peace-time and especially in time of war. By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism." (Leon Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay*)

The rapprochement of the unions with right-wing governments and their conduct as an instrument of order against a resistant population can presently be observed in several European countries. In France, the unions reacted to the mass demonstrations against the dismantling of employment rights by holding negotiations with Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, thus strengthening the right wing of the Gaullists. In Italy, the unions stand unreservedly behind the Prodi government, whose political agenda is very similar to that of Angela Merkel.



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