

Berlin: Left Party opposes wage demand of public service workers

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1 September 2007

The German Left Party is currently holding a series of national and state conferences at which a long list of demands for social improvements is being presented, and the party's professed opposition to a "policy of constantly beating down wages" is being proclaimed. In the Berlin Senate, however, where the Left Party shares power in coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD), it is working precisely to "beat down wages."

At the start of last week, workers employed in administrative offices such as vehicle registration and immigration, together with local police officers, conducted a two-hour warning strike. They were responding to the repeated refusal of the Berlin state government to conduct contract talks with public service workers.

The public service workers are fighting for salary parity with workers in other German states. They are demanding three single payments of 300 euros plus a wage increase of 2.9 percent, beginning in 2008. They argue that their demands are entirely justified, especially in light of the sacrifices they made to consolidate the city's budget, and the positive balance sheet which the Senate has announced for the coming year.

A leaflet drawn up for the warning strike states: "Since 2003, by accepting wage cuts at a time of rapidly rising living expenses, we have assisted in the reduction of the debt burden that was entirely the responsibility of politicians in Berlin. These salary cuts totalled between 8 and 12 percent, which, together with cuts in holiday pay, amounted to budget savings over 4 years of at least 2 billion euros."

Over the past five years, public service workers in Berlin have suffered more extensive attacks on their working and living conditions at the hands of the ruling

SPD/Left Party state government than their counterparts in any other German state.

The current conflict takes place against a background of years of welfare and wage cuts, which only intensified when the SPD and Left Party took power in Berlin in 2001. In the initial coalition negotiations following the election, the SPD and Left Party, then called the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), agreed to wipe out 15,000 jobs and impose a longer workweek as well as reduced wages.

The brutal cost-cutting program was aimed at bailing out wealthy investors threatened with bankruptcy following the collapse of the Berlin Banking Company. This program was adopted in the face of popular opposition to the growth of social inequality, which played a major role in the large vote for the Party of Democratic Socialism in the 2001 Berlin elections.

Barely in power, the SPD and PDS continued and intensified the same anti-social policies that had been carried out by the previous government. In January of 2002, the so-called "left coalition" tried to push through the planned cuts in public service, with the agreement of the trade unions, but was unable to directly impose its measures in the face of considerable public protest.

In January of 2003, the Senate decided to withdraw from the Berlin state employers' associations, which meant it was no longer bound to existing contract law. The PDS—turned Left Party, which has sharply criticised companies and state governments for bypassing contract law, pioneered this anti-social and reactionary policy in Berlin.

The public service workers union, Verdi, which has close ties to the Left Party in Berlin, opposed protests by its members. At a high-level conference, Verdi boss Franc Bsirske agreed to the Senate's package of cuts.

The result was a so-called “applied contract,” which required public service workers in Berlin to accept wage cuts of between 8 and 12 percent, combined with greater labour “flexibility.” In exchange for these concessions, the deal shielded existing employees against redundancy up to the end of 2009. However, this clause, introduced to enable the unions to sell the deal, has not halted the destruction of jobs. Job cuts have continued, while no new workers have been employed.

The PDS justified these and other social cuts with the same standard argument: It was necessary to balance the state budget in order to create the conditions in the future for a “more just” social policy.

Thus, Berlin was able to register a budget surplus last year. New debts will be minimal in the current year and the Senate plans to begin paying off old debts starting in 2008. A surplus of 474 million euros is anticipated for next year.

However, rather than introducing a “more just” social policy, the SPD and Left Party want to maintain existing cuts while preparing new cuts for the coming years.

Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) explained the Senate’s policy: “The reorganization continues. In particular, Berlin will work in the coming years to further reduce its public service, so that it is no longer larger than in two other city states—Bremen and Hamburg.”

A press statement from the Senate Finance Department agrees: “The strict expenditure discipline of recent years will be continued over the entire period of the medium-term financial plan. Primary expenditures (without interest) will remain frozen to the level of 2004.”

The Senate has reacted in provocative fashion to the recent warning strike. As chief negotiator, Interior Senator Ehrhardt Körting (SPD) immediately declared there would be no one-off payments and no wage increase. He said the Senate would offer the unions only the possibility of introducing the general state contract agreed in 2006. That, however, could actually lead to some groups of workers facing more cuts. In any event, there would be “no more money,” Körting told news reporters on several occasions.

Verdi reacted to this “offer” by declaring its readiness to negotiate, and agreed to meet with Körting

on September 19, the date suggested by the Senate. The state deputy for Verdi, Astrid Westhope, told a press conference: “The demand for wage increases is central for us. Our colleagues are urgently pushing us on this.” She added that, “if necessary,” there would be more warning strikes in the weeks ahead.

These are utterly hollow threats which cannot disguise the fact that Verdi is working hand in glove with the Left Party and the SPD. Verdi functionaries agreed to previous wages cuts, and then helped impose them against the resistance of public service workers. It is no coincidence that more than sixty Verdi officials signed the founding appeal of the Left Party. Many of them were present at the party’s founding conference last June.

Public service workers in Berlin must draw the necessary political lessons and take up an aggressive fight against the anti-social policy of the SPD/Left Party on the one hand, and Verdi on the other. Only by taking their labour dispute into their own hands, i.e., establishing their own action and negotiating committees in opposition to the Verdi bureaucracy, is it possible to prevent a sell-out and a further degradation of their incomes and conditions of work.



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