

Germany: Public service workers strike

Explosive mood in factories, offices, nurseries and hospitals

Our correspondent
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The current round of contract negotiations for public service workers in Germany has revealed the profound level of discontent amongst broad layers of the population over ever-worsening social conditions. Public sector employees at a state and federal level are no longer prepared to accept declining incomes at the same time that profits of German companies and tax receipts for the federal budget have increased dramatically. The recent declaration by Chancellor Angela Merkel that the economic upturn has been to the benefit of the broad majority of the population is widely regarded as nothing more than slap in the face.

The huge participation in the warning strikes held during the past few days is a testimony to the explosive mood in factories, offices, nurseries and hospitals across the country.

The demand raised by the public service union Verdi for an 8 percent wage increase, or at least 200 euros per month, is regarded by most strikers as the absolute minimum acceptable, and the “offer” made so far by the employers’ side of 5 percent paid over two years, with increased work hours, is regarded as nothing less than a provocation.

The expansion of the strikes this week is aimed at putting pressure on the employers, who are meeting with Verdi officials for a third round of negotiations. Up until now, the employers’ side has refused to make any concessions. Public sector union members responded by taking to the streets in growing numbers and on one day—Thursday—more workers participated in strike action than on the six days of previous strike action in February.

On Tuesday, in addition to strikes in the transport systems and city administrations in different regions, a number of major airports were closed by strike action. At Frankfurt airport, more than 2,000 employees were involved in the strike action, and more than 100 flights had to be cancelled. Ground personnel stopped work at 4 a.m., and shortly afterwards were joined by security

workers and some airport fire-brigade personnel. Participation in the strikes was surprisingly high.

Despite long queues and delays, passengers at the airports demonstrated a considerable degree of sympathy for the demands of the strikers and waited patiently.

Hardest hit was German domestic and intra-European air traffic. Strikers were obviously responding to the arrogant attitude of the employers, who had earlier declared in a round of negotiations that workers could strike and “nobody would notice the difference anyway!” “Such a claim is entirely inappropriate for Frankfurt airport,” commented the local daily, *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Widespread strike action affected large areas of central Hesse on Wednesday, including the cities of Kassel, Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, Darmstadt, Hanau, Giessen, and Wetzlar, as well as numerous smaller municipalities. A total of 18,500 employees took part in the strikes, and in Frankfurt, public transport came to a virtual stop with thousands using bicycles or cars to get to work. At the same time, large parts of the city administrations were paralysed. A total of 50 nurseries were closed in Frankfurt, while others were affected by partial strikes. Garbage-disposal workers joined the action, and restrictions were also imposed at university clinics and the clinical centre at the large Höchst factory.



Frankfurt demonstration

A central demonstration brought 6,000 strikers into Frankfurt city centre. Delegations attended from numerous offices and local institutions intent on voicing their opposition to their low

wages and miserable working conditions. Also in attendance were job centre and labour agency personnel.

The militant mood of the demonstrators underlined the growing discontent of public service workers. While carrying out discussions with the employers aimed at finding a compromise deal as quickly as possible, the Verdi bureaucracy is desperately seeking to contain the mass movement by organising a series of selective strikes and protests.

The strike action has met with a large measure of support within the population, even from those directly hit, including parents unable to deliver their children to the local nursery. The growing militancy threatens to turn the struggle over pay into an open trial of strength with the government—although the Verdi leadership is doing everything it can to prevent such a confrontation. On Monday, train drivers are due to start unlimited strike action, thereby adding an entirely new dimension to the strike movement.

Public service employees told the WSWs in Frankfurt why they were supporting the current round of strikes.



Damir Krupic and Naoual Aloui

Damir Krupic is a nurse at the University of Frankfurt clinic, and Naoual Aloui works at the Höchst clinical centre. They only recently completed their basic training.

Naoual: “Although we only completed our examination last April, we have experienced the problems confronting the staff at clinics. We are already burdened with a great deal of responsibility and are constantly required to work overtime, which is not paid. The overtime is supposed to be compensated with time off, but our work schedules are such that we have no opportunity to take free time.”

Damir: “The wages are completely inadequate when one is forced to pay rent for an apartment. I would like to buy furniture, for example, but that is not possible on my salary. When I have paid the 1,100-euro rent for my apartment, then I am left with just 400 euros to live on. I do not even have enough to take a trip with friends.”

Naoual: “For young people like us it is possible to

survive, but for anyone who has children and a family to feed, the situation is intolerable. At the same time, it is clear that there is enough money to go round—it is just distributed unfairly.”

Damir: “Just think about it! Now they have offered us 5 percent over two years and expect us to work longer hours. We have worked it out—we end up even worse off and would be working an extra one or two hours per week for nothing. At the same time, profits are going up and unemployment is decreasing. Now, the ordinary citizen wants his slice of the cake.”

Silvia, Heidi and Moni work in an old people’s home and told of the extremely difficult situation in the home arising from the lack of personnel:

“We are completely understaffed, care for the elderly is basically at subsistence level because of the shortage of staff,” said Silvia. “We cannot find personnel because the pay is so bad. All the applicants say it is not enough to live on.”

“We are continuously forced to work overtime and sometimes must even work double shifts,” said Heidi. “That is officially not permitted, but if there is nobody there for the next shift, then we cannot just leave our patients in the lurch. We are forced to work on.

“In addition, work in a home for the elderly is physically demanding and the remuneration is utterly inadequate,” said Moni. “At the same time, prices are going up the whole time. How is one expected to survive? We have not had a wage increase for six years. That is completely unacceptable, and now they want to increase our working week to 40 hours. They have got a nerve! There is no way we could accept such a deal.”



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