

Berlin: Anger and indignation over new public sector deal

Vote 'no' on the new contract!

Of Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) and the *World Socialist Web Site* call upon all municipal employees in Berlin to critically review the contract agreed by the union on November 12 and vote it down.

After nearly 18 months, during which workers engaged in numerous protest actions, demonstrations and strikes for a wage increase, the wage committee, under the leadership of the Verdi public services trade union, has negotiated a wage contract that means only another decline in real wages for employees.

Besides a one-time payout of €300 unilaterally agreed to by the Berlin Senate, and already paid out in October, city workers are due to receive a miserly monthly increase in base pay of €65 from next June. Because the €65 monthly increase will not begin until next June, the actual pay increase for 2008 and 2009 amounts to just €32 a month.

Verdi leading negotiator, Astrid Westhoff, has said that the new agreement increases wages for the majority of Verdi-organized employees by about the 2.9 percent originally demanded. This statement is brazenly deceptive. In addition to the 2.9 percent wage increase, which was demanded by the wage committees of Verdi, the GEW (teachers), GdP (police), and IG BAU (construction) unions in early 2007, workers should be entitled to an extra three single payments of €300, totalling €900. Now the union has agreed to a contract that would only pay €755 in total. This means the unions have agreed to a deal of much less than the original demand of €900 and have completely abandoned demands for a 2.9 percent increase.

Taking into account the last four years, when employees saw no increase in pay, base pay will have shrunk by around €10.50 per month—on the basis of Westhoff's own calculations—which means that the latest deal averages out at less than 0.5 percent. With a general inflation rate of 3 percent over the last year, this means a drastic cut in real wages.

With the explicit renunciation of “strike actions to force general wage increases (including one-time payments)” until December 31, 2009, the unions have excluded any possibility of revising these pay agreements.

Anger and indignation amongst workers

The enormous level of outrage among workers over this sell-out by the unions is tangible. The *Berliner Zeitung* quotes a public pre-school head from Kreuzberg as saying, “If it's only about increasing base pay a little and beginning only in summer, then that is a liberty. They've screwed us.”

A teacher told the same newspaper, “That was of course all calculated. The Senate and the unions already made a deal behind our backs.” And her colleague added, “This is a betrayal for those who struck, and also for the parents who couldn't bring their children to school. All that effort for so little! The unions have lost any concept of reality.”

An employee of the city's Department of Motor Vehicles in Kreuzberg spoke very bitterly, saying, “We all recognized this morning that the final agreement was very disappointing for us.” Why the €65-a-month raise will only start in June is incomprehensible. Many workers hope that this proposed agreement will be voted down, according to the report in the *Berliner Zeitung*.

The unions are facing mounting difficulties in getting this agreement passed. There is a sentiment growing, especially among Verdi members, that the union negotiators do not have enough support to get a majority “yes” vote. In the police union (GdP), there is “an argument raging” said their state chief Eberhard Schönberg. He explained further to the newspaper that he himself “in no way sees the result as a victory.”

The GEW (Union for Education and Science) has already signalled many teachers that the contract will be rejected in the ratification vote. An informational event of the GEW, originally planned for Monday evening, was postponed until Thursday, November 20, in the hope that passions would have cooled by then.

Attrition tactics of the unions

Such a rotten contract coming on the heels of one of the longest struggles by Berlin's public sector cannot be understood only as a result of the wage committee's willingness to make concessions. Much more important was the role of the wage committee, under the leadership of Verdi, in undercutting workers' morale in order to impose the terms of the Social Democratic Party-Left Party Senate.

The role that Verdi plays in enforcing the anti-worker policies of the Senate on public sector employees has become more obvious in recent years. For almost seven years, public employees have faced an alliance of the SPD, Left Party and Verdi, who together pushed through an aggressive austerity program, implementing one drastic social cut after another.

Following a recent contract agreed by Verdi, city workers were subject to an average 10 percent pay reduction and during the last few years no less than 15,000 jobs have been cut in the public sector. An additional 3,000 jobs have been shed in the Berlin Transportation Authority (BVG) along with a 10 percent wage cut for transport workers. The low-wage sector has mushroomed, with the creation of 34,000 1-euro jobs. There have been massive wage and job cuts at hospitals and increased fees for nursery education. These are only a few of the "successes" that the Senate, working hand-in-hand with Verdi, has pushed through against the opposition of workers and union members.

The reason for this collaboration between the unions and Senate is not difficult to explain. Almost the whole of Verdi's bureaucratic apparatus is staffed with members of the Senate's ruling parties, the SPD and Left Party. At negotiations over wages, members of these parties are sitting on both sides of the table. Verdi supports the Senate's policies and pushes its agenda in the face of opposition from Verdi's own membership.

This explains the stalling tactics of the leading negotiators, who aim to wear down the membership and workers by attrition.

When the unions entered negotiations with the Senate in early 2007, they already had to withstand growing pressure from their memberships, who were no longer ready to make concessions, like the loss of 10 percent of their real wages to inflation, in order to maintain a budget surplus.

The official wage negotiations could be used for several months as a pretext for abstaining from employee strikes, though the Senate never tired of pointing out that it excluded consideration of any rise in income for 2008 or 2009. Only early this year did the unions finally organize limited strikes. In one vote, 85.4 percent supported an open-ended strike, which was to have begun in May.

The scheduling of the public-sector strike was well calculated by Verdi. From March to the beginning of May, BVG employees were locked in a bitter struggle against the Senate. Verdi did everything possible to isolate the BVG employees' struggle from that of other public employees. At the beginning of May, the union ended the BVG strike with their signature on a wage contract that meant a huge worsening of employees' conditions. Only then were other public sector workers allowed to take limited strike action.

That marked the beginning of the on-off strike attrition tactic by the unions.

On April 10 city regulators struck. On May 8 workers at the public offices went out on strike, and on May 20 and 21 the schools and day care centres followed suit. Only the regulatory agencies and public offices conducted longer strikes, but always with regular breaks, during which workers had to finish work put behind schedule by the strikes. Over months, the struggle by the unions remained at this low level.

It was precisely this type of demoralising salami tactic on the part of the unions that emboldened the Senate. In August the Senate declared its own arbitrary solution involving two single payments of €300. The trade unions expressed their opposition to the Senate offer, called for an intensification of action this autumn and called for an eight-day strike from November 10. Just two days into the strike the unions threw in the towel and agreed to the current rotten compromise.

It is already clear that following this latest capitulation by the unions, the Berlin Senate is preparing new attacks on the jobs and living standards of public sector workers. Senate Finance Minister Thilo Sarrazin has already indicated that Berlin workers must be prepared to further tighten their belts as the city's budget deficit worsens dramatically in line with the current financial crisis.

In this situation the most urgent task confronting public sectors, is to break free from the conspiratorial shackles of the SPD-Left Party Senate in alliance with the trade unions. An effective struggle against the Senate requires the building of strike committees to defend jobs and wages that function entirely independently of the trade unions.

This is first and foremost a political task, which can only be conducted on the basis of a socialist perspective firmly opposed to the existing policy of making workers pay for the crisis. The Socialist Equality Party fights for a perspective, which makes the needs and requirements of the broad masses of the population the focus point for political decision-making. Such a perspective requires the nationalisation of the major companies and banks and their subordination to popular democratic control.

We call upon all Berlin public sector workers to vote down the current sell-out agreed by Verdi and other unions. Establish contact with the Editorial Board of the WSWS to organise resistance to the trade unions and establish a concrete political alternative to the bankrupt reformism of the SPD and Left Party.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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