

Kindergarten staff strike in Germany: 30,000 demonstrate in Cologne

Our correspondents
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Thirty thousand child care workers, social workers and teachers attended a national demonstration in the German city of Cologne on June 15 to demand increased wages as well as improved health and welfare provisions. The attendance was much higher than the organisers had expected.

Carrying banners and flags, the demonstration wound its way through Cologne. The location chosen for the final rally, the city's Haymarket, was much too small to contain the participants. The demonstrators, most of whom were female, wore red T-shirts with the slogan "Shaper of the Future"—drawing attention to the pedagogical importance of their work. Due to the size of the protest, the police closed down one of the bridges over the Rhine, and the rally was transmitted to the mass of the demonstration on a giant screen.

The marchers demanded an improved wages scale and better health protection for child care workers. According to one health insurance company study, child care workers take off more days through sickness than other teachers. The wages of young care workers are also completely inadequate. Since the introduction of the public service contract agreed on by the trade unions and employers in 2006 newly employed care workers receive up to €700 less than already employed staff.

The 220,000 workers employed in kindergartens and day care centres, as well as the juvenile welfare service and social agencies, have been taking strike action for more than a month to press their demands. Some 90 percent of union members voted in favour of strike action in a national ballot and tens of thousands have taken part during the last month in protest activities and strikes.

According to the unions, hundreds of day care centres, schools and other institutions remained closed Monday. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia alone, 9,000 teachers and social workers closed day care centres with strike action.

In Hesse, 4,500 took strike action, with 1,600 in Rhineland-Palatinate and around 3,000 in Baden-Württemberg.

However, the main unions involved—Verdi and the GEW (Education and Science Workers Union)—have limited the dispute to isolated one-day strikes and done everything in their power to prevent the conflict from developing into an open confrontation with the federal government and the parties of the ruling grand coalition, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-Christian Social Union (CSU).

There are many indications that the national demonstration in Cologne was organised by the trade unions to provide the cover for a sell-out. On the evening of June 15, the unions began negotiations with the local government employers' organisation, the VKA, and are seeking to finalise an agreement.

The determination of Verdi and GEW officials to avoid a political confrontation found a perverse expression at the Cologne rally when they provided a platform for government representatives to address the demonstrators. It would not have been difficult for the unions to organise a powerful joint rally involving other workers whose jobs and wages are threatened—at the department store chain Karstadt/Quelle, Opel auto employees or other sections of public service, including fellow workers from France and Poland. Instead, union officials invited leading politicians from the same Berlin parties responsible for the current plight of the teachers and social workers.

No less than the federal minister for family affairs, Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), was given free rein to express her supposed support for the demonstrators and declare her displeasure with the fact that they had not had a proper pay rise since 1991. Your demands, she told the crowd, are "justified. However, they still cost money. How much is good education worth?" Having posed the question, she declined to provide an answer.

SPD chairman Franz Müntefering promised that he would intervene in the dispute. "The federation, states and municipalities would have to pull together," he declared.

From his mouth, this came across as a threat. Müntefering is one of the main architects of the anti-welfare Hartz IV measures.

The chairperson of the Green parliamentary group, Renate Künast, pleaded for “a crib summit,” while the leader of the parliamentary group of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, complained that we are a long way away “from equal chances for all new-born children.”

The majority of the demonstrators were clearly opposed to the hijacking of their protest by these high-ranking politicians. In particular, von der Leyen and Müntefering were greeted with booing and jeering.

The biggest applause was reserved for local cabaret artist Wilfried Schmickler, who launched a fierce broadside against “all of the von der Leyens.” “Those are the same people who are stuffing money in the pockets of tax frauds,” he said. “Now they are pretending they have a place in their hearts for ordinary people.” The cabaret artist also pointed to the real reason for the appearance by the group of politicians: “They fear that sometime in the near future things could get out of control, i.e., the much talked about ‘social peace.’ But in fact the war has been going on for a long time.”

Demonstrators interviewed

Reporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of the demonstrators:

Un Chung-Hi has worked in an urban kindergarten in a poorer quarter of Reutlingen (a city in southern Baden-Württemberg, with a population of 110,000) since 1997-1998: “I’m a child care nurse, and belong myself among the poor. I work just 60 percent of the week, or 23.5 hours. I would gladly work more, but apparently that is not possible. In our kindergarten, we care for 44 children between the ages of three and six years old.

“There are just five of us, with some working three quarters of a week. Twice a week, we receive some help from staff from the language development section. We work under very difficult conditions. If, for example, any of our workers are ill, there are not always replacements available. The staffing level is very tight, and we cannot deal with the children’s needs as we would like to.”

Sarah Vetter is 22 years old. She told us, “I work in a nursery in Kreuztal [a town in North Rhine-Westphalia]. I finished my training this summer and have a contract for 15

hours per week, and just €550 [\$US 761] per month income. That is not much for a young person to prepare their future.”

Sarah described the limitations of the premises where she works. “At the moment, we have 24 day places for children, and in the summer, we will have a total of 31 kids. We eat in the corridor with the midday children, and urgently need better premises to care properly for the children. The children then go to sleep in a room which is less than 4-by-4-metres square. This is where at 24 children either sleep or rest now—and in the summer, this total will increase to 31.”

There are “nine others working alongside me, but only two are full-time staff. This means we must work in shifts. We would work gladly differently, with more personnel, with more space and less noise, I would also like more hours. But it is not even worthwhile asking. I tell anyone who asks me if I would choose this profession a second time, that I would have to seriously think about it because there is no future here.”

Sarah was participating on the demonstration because “the employers should finally do something to ensure that our situation improves.” It is not just “always about banks. It concerns our future. It is about people. Everyone should be paid a reasonable wage for their work. The working conditions are not only bad in our profession, they are bad everywhere, and it is time, in the middle of this economic crisis, to transform everything completely.”

She added: “It is about my health and my basic working conditions. Many people say, you just play with the children. But it is not like that. We must prepare the children for school and should therefore be paid accordingly. It is not only managers who have responsibility. In my opinion, we have even more responsibility, because we are working with small people. We have a responsibility for the future.”

While kindergarten and child care workers are angry about their intolerable working conditions and demanding serious improvements, Verdi is already carefully preparing a sell-out. Shortly before the round of negotiations that began on Monday evening in Fulda, Verdi boss Frank Bsirske declared that the union was “seriously and constructively” intent on a deal.



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