

Germany: Child care workers fight for better pay and conditions

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Staff employed in kindergartens and child day-care centres throughout Germany have been on strike for better pay and conditions, along with those working in juvenile and social welfare agencies.

The cities and municipalities belonging to the Local Employers' Association (VKA) have refused to make any significant improvements in the working conditions and pay of the almost exclusively female workforce. VKA negotiator Manfred Hoffmann said, "We demand an immediate end to the strikes." "The unions should make it clear that the strike is not directed against parents and children," Hoffman said. "This can only be done by calling an immediate end to the strike."

The VKA is also resorting to the courts against the strikers. In Hamburg two weeks ago, the district labour court banned strikes by day-care staff for a second time. In May, the labour court in Kiel had also banned local strikes.

The media is also lending support to the employers. The longer the strikes last, the more frequently the media reports that parents and their children are "suffering" as a result—although it is proving difficult for journalists find any angry parents.

However, kindergarten workers and other staff involved in the strike report how their demands are receiving widespread support from parents. Although the strike means parents are compelled to find alternative child care arrangements, the vast majority endorse the need for improved working conditions in child care, which in the long-run would have positive benefits for the children, parents and workers.

The demands of the 220,000 child-care staff and social workers are more than justified. They are demanding their jobs be re-graded, leading to a wage increase which would reverse the cuts agreed previously by the trade union Verdi when it signed a new public service contract (Tarifvertrag für den öffentlichen Dienst, or TVöD) in 2005.

Those employed after 2006 and paid according to TVöD receive starting pay up to €700 a month less than those hired 10 to 15 years earlier. Some of those employed in child day-

care centres receive less than €1,500, not much more than the pittance paid under the Hartz IV welfare reforms.

In addition, the municipalities are now frequently only offering limited work contracts. Workers that are re-hired and sign a new employment contract are then placed back in the lowest salary bracket.

Now Verdi and the education union GEW are calling for the kindergarten teachers and others to be re-graded, which would mean a gross starting pay of €2,237. However, even this salary is hardly "reasonable" if one considers workers' rising workloads.

Nearly all of Germany's states (länder), which have responsibility for education and child care policy, have drawn up plans making early childhood education qualitatively more demanding and requiring additional tasks of staff. Those requiring advanced training because of the increased demands being placed upon them are not given any relief, causing staff shortages in the kindergartens and other establishments. Moreover, the extension of child care to under-threes has created additional burdens.

But no municipality has reacted to the changed conditions by hiring new staff. On the contrary, the sector faces cutbacks. For years, instead of hiring more personnel, posts have been reduced. This has led to nearly half of those employed in child day-care in West Germany and three quarters of those employed in East Germany being over 40 years old. According to some estimates, there is a staff shortfall of 25,000 to 50,000.

The municipalities are consciously exploiting the staff's high degree of social commitment; for most of them, work is not merely a job but a vocation. But workloads are bringing conditions to the boiling point. Class sizes of 20, 30 or more children have negative health implications for children and workers alike.

A poll of kindergarten teachers and other staff showed that the high workloads are causing high levels of illness among workers. Only 22 percent regard their working conditions as "good" and over half suffer from excessive workloads. While 26 percent say they suffer negative consequences as a

result of the emotional burdens of their jobs, only 13 percent say they suffer no physical complaints during or after work.

As a result, only one quarter of all kindergarten staff believe they will reach pension age in reasonable health. Verdi and GEW are demanding the new contract include occupational health protection. They are calling for the establishment of parity committees that can initiate and supervise protective measures to safeguard workers' health.

Kindergarten workers have proved in recent weeks that they are willing to fight. The strike vote passed in a ballot with 89.9 percent of union members in favour. Since then, tens of thousands have supported the strikes.

At the start of this week, 30,000 kindergarten workers and associated child-care staff took part in a nationwide demonstration in Cologne.

However, kindergarten workers should take heed: Verdi and the GEW are planning a rotten compromise in the negotiations. The unions opened up the platform in Cologne on Monday to high-ranking political representatives, including Minister for Family Affairs Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Social Democratic Party SPD leader Franz Müntefering, Green Party parliamentary group chairman Renate Künast and her counterpart in the Left Party, Gregor Gysi. This must serve as a warning. In an election year the unions are desperately attempting to demobilise a mass movement directed against the government and the political establishment as a whole.

In the last 10 years, governments including the SPD, the Greens and CDU/CCSU have pushed through social cuts, creating the highest levels of poverty in the post-war period, particularly affecting families and their children. These parties have consciously established a massive low-wage sector, including in education and social services.

A recent UNICEF study found social care in Germany was only of moderate quality. Among other things, the report criticised the fact that expenditure on early childhood education and development was too small, representing only 0.4 percent of gross domestic product.

In the state legislatures and municipalities, party colleagues of Müntefering, Künast and von der Leyen are implementing cuts in social spending. The Left Party is no exception. In Berlin, where it has sat in the city legislature for eight years, it has drastically cut wages and worsened working conditions in the public service.

The Berlin city legislature was one of the first to withdraw from the employers' association in order to implement reductions in pay of up to 12 percent. Jobs were cut, resulting in increased class sizes in kindergartens, rising from 16 children per teacher to 21. For years in Berlin, the SPD/Left Party coalition in the city legislature has been saving €12 million to €15 million annually in child day-care

costs alone.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the so-called child education law of the CDU/FDP (Free Democratic Party) state government came into force in August 2008. In particular, it has expanded places for under-threes at the expense of staff, leading to further increases in class sizes.

In order to implement the demands of workers in child care, education and social work—and to improve working conditions on a long-term basis—their struggle must be linked with those in other industries.

The struggle of workers at automaker Opel and department store chain Karstadt; those employed in crisis-ridden industries and in the public service must be made the starting point of a broad offensive against cuts in wages and welfare programmes and must be directed against the grand coalition in the federal government in Berlin.

All working people have an interest in well-funded child care and child development. This presupposes an enormous improvement of working conditions and pay for those working in the sector. When the local authorities say there is no money to pay for this, it should be requisitioned from where it is presently being squandered. For years, the parties sitting in the Berlin city legislature have taken millions out of the pockets of ordinary people only to pass them on to the banks and large corporations.

This redistribution from those at the bottom to those at the top must be reversed. This poses working people directly with socialist tasks.

These can be only achieved if workers break with their old, national organizations and unite across Europe and internationally to fight for the socialist reorganization of society. This aim, the building of an international socialist party, is the object of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



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