

German unions sell out childcare staff

Dietmar Henning
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As expected, the public service union Verdi and the teachers union GEW have agreed a sell-out for employees in German local education and social services.

On July 27, following five days of negotiations in Frankfurt-Main, the two unions agreed a contract with the federation of local employers (VKA) covering pay and health protection. In a press release, Verdi chief Frank Bsirske sought to justify the deal that brought to an end months of strike action by child care personnel. According to leading GEW official Ilse Schaad, "After tough deliberations and considerable personal effort, the deal was a respectable result."

Things look very different to the 220,000 childcare staff and social workers. Their dispute has lasted six months with nearly 150,000 employees taking part in numerous strikes, and in many cities, the biggest demonstrations ever organized by this section of workers. Following a contract agreed to by the unions in 2005, new starters in child care received considerably lower rates of pay, while older workers also experienced deterioration in their wages. Now all the efforts by these workers to improve their situation by strike action have proved fruitless.

In its press release, Verdi sought to present the agreement in the best light declaring that the deal awarded employees an average increase of 150 Euros per month (gross). In fact this sum only applies to new starters (employed after September 2005). Those employed prior to October 1 2005 will receive a 2.65 percent wage increase, which amounts to approximately 75 Euros per month (gross). The average increase therefore amounts to barely 100 Euros.

For other occupational groups, the deal is even worse. The monthly average pay increase for childcare workers is 22 Euros and for remedial teachers 70 Euros. The pay increases for social workers are even lower. When one takes account of the fact that 60 percent of all staff employed in nurseries work part-time, then it is clear that not much remains of the highly touted pay increase. At the same time, not all the details of the new deal have

been finalized.

A childcare worker complained on the Verdi Internet site that she will receive 100 Euros less per month based on the latest contract. A social worker criticized the considerable differences in wage scale in his occupational group, which serves to drive a wedge between the workers involved. This offer cannot be accepted, writes the Verdi member.

The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* Witten quotes one head of a day-care centre who declares: "It is completely unclear at this point whether our demands for better conditions of work and smaller groups, have been realized." The salary increase is no reason for "excessive joy": "One already knows what will be left over from it." She would have preferred to continue strike action.

The health protection provisions laid down in the new contract are even more threadbare than the pay deal. The contract fails to lay down the obligatory and clear regulations, which are so necessary for health protection. For years the government in Berlin has pillaged the public purse and transferred funds to the rich and big business. Starved of funding from employers, local municipalities have passed the cuts onto the population and their employees.

As a result, working conditions in nurseries and other educational institutions and social services have worsened considerably. The proportion of children per childcare worker has in many cases risen drastically. Less and less staff have to deal with an increasing number of children and young people. This work load will only increase when a nursery place for every child over the age of one is introduced in 2013 in accordance with recent legislation.

Under conditions of shrinking budgets for the municipalities due to the economic crisis, the latest contract will undoubtedly prove to be counterproductive for the working conditions of childcare and social workers.

Immediately after the contract was announced, officials in the cities and communities declared that the extra

funding for the salary increases must be retrieved by cuts in other areas. The VKA, the local government federation, asserts that the extra costs involved for all municipalities will range between 500 and 700 million Euros per year.

The Solingen city treasurer Ralf Weeke (Social Democratic Party, SPD) stated: “It is already clear that we are on our last legs financially speaking and must make cuts elsewhere.” The city of Hamburg declared that the extra costs would have to be passed on to the support organizations for nurseries and social services. These in turn would have to implement cuts involving “the size of groups or the number of children per child care worker”, according to the Hamburg Verdi district officer Wolfgang Rose.

Many cities will also consider increasing the contributions made by parents for childcare, said the director of the German Federation of Cities, Stephan Articus.

The city of Frankfurt-Main estimates 3 million Euros in extra costs, Munich 8 million, and Stuttgart 9 million Euros. The German capital of Berlin, which would have faced estimated extra costs of 15 million Euros per year, is in fact not affected by the agreement. Under its senate government—a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party—Berlin withdrew from the local employers’ association in 2003, which means the contract is invalid for the city. The SPD and Left Party in Berlin have made it clear they have no intention of increasing staff salaries.

Verdi’s aim: No labour disputes in the run-up to the election

The deal was “vigorously” and “controversially” discussed inside Verdi itself. Directly following the end of negotiations on Monday morning, the strike committees met. A press conference scheduled for noon was postponed repeatedly, because discussion was still continuing over the deal. In the event, Baden-Württemberg was the only state to oppose the contract. Some delegates from other regions also voted no, but in the end the deal struck by the unions was agreed. The contract “was no dream result, but we support it” (Verdi leaflet). Verdi members are due to vote on the contract in the period up to August 14, and, if accepted, it is due to come into effect November 1, 2009.

Many workers were surprised at the speed at which the

deal has been struck and implemented. Trade union negotiators and representatives of the municipalities negotiated non-stop for five days and nights, and the final deal is only slightly higher than the offer made by the employers June 17. In the lower salary bracket for teaching staff (2,040 Euros), for example, the increase stipulated in the agreed contract is just 5 Euros gross or 2 Euros net above the proposal of June 17.

In fact, the speed with which the deal was reached is explained by the fact that in a few months’ time parliamentary (Bundestag) elections will take place. Throughout the economy a wave of factory closures and redundancies is taking place and the unions—with Verdi at the fore—are desperate to prevent any confrontation with the government.

Verdi has close links to the leading political parties in Berlin. Verdi chairman Bsirske is a member of the Greens and most union officials are either members of the SPD or the Left Party. On the other side of the table are the local employers, who are usually affiliated with the SPD or Christian Democratic Union. The negotiator for the local employers was formerly personnel chief and town councillor in Munich, VKA president Dr. Thomas Böhle. He is also a member of both the SPD and Verdi.

Verdi is intent on preventing the development of a broad social movement shortly before the Bundestag elections that would come into conflict with the grand coalition in Berlin and the representatives of the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party and the unions in the municipal administrations. To this end, Verdi restricted its activities during the childcare dispute to futile appeals and isolated strikes.

Child and day-care centre staff together with social service personnel should vote down this latest contract and oppose the conspiracy of union officials with federal and state governments, which work hand in hand with big business and the banks.



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