# Teachers in Berlin face political tasks

**Socialist Equality Party (Germany)**
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*The Socialist Equality Party distributed the following statement to a demonstration of teachers in Berlin on April 5.*

The teachers' protests taking place in Berlin today should become the prelude of a political offensive against the city's Social Democratic Party/Left Party Senate and the trade unions aligned with them. After almost 10 years of so-called "leftist" government policy by a coalition of the SPD and Left Party, the working conditions of teachers in the German capital are catastrophic.

The teachers were particularly affected by financial restructuring measures. In early 2003, the Senate agreed to a general increase of working hours for public servants from 40 hours a week to 42 hours. For teachers—public as well as non-public—this meant an increase of teaching times from 24 hours to 26 hours. In July 2003, the Senate withdrew the increase in working hours for a section of civil servants—but not for teachers—in exchange for severe reductions of Christmas and holiday allowances, which did affect the teachers.

The same year, the Senate abolished the age reduction system, i.e., the possibility to gradually reduce teaching hours for teachers older than 50 years. This was justified with the explanation that teachers could take partial retirement, which has always involved a loss of income. In 2009 this partial retirement was abolished as well. Thus, Berlin is the only German state that denies any possibility of relief to its older teachers. Furthermore, since 2004 Berlin's teachers have been denied the status of public servants, thereby reducing their wages by several hundred euros, while their work schedules and other working conditions are arbitrarily decided by the Senate with teachers having no legal means to defend themselves.

According to the education administration, in 2009/2010 the average age of teachers in Berlin was 50.3 years; today it has reached 50.6 years. One year after the current Senate entered office, the average age was 48.4 years. Under the Senate, the number of chronically ill teachers has risen due to the increased workload from 830 in 2006 to 1,450 in 2010. Through numerous tricks and extortions by the Senate aimed at reducing the incomes of public servants, Berlin teachers presently earn 6 percent less than their colleagues in other German states. An adjustment to the level of other states has been announced only for late 2017.

In its repeated attacks on the working conditions of teachers and other public servants, the Senate can rely on the full support of the trade unions. They consider their most important objective as keeping the opposition against the Senate under control and sabotaging any effective protest. In contract bargaining, members of the same party frequently face each other across the table. The implementation of the attacks is always the same. First the Senate makes a provocative initial offer; the unions react outraged and organize a few harmless protests to prevent a rebellion of the rank and file. Then they suddenly agree to a lousy compromise and explain afterwards that their members lacked militancy.

The Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW, Education and Science Workers Union), has played this role for years. All contracts stipulating measures aimed a worsening the teachers' situation bear the signature of the GEW. Teachers will also remember the last major wage dispute, which went on for a whole year. When the public servants unions entered the wage dispute in early 2007, they were already under growing pressure from their members, who after four years of wage sacrifices amounting to about 10 percent demanded a share of the budget surplus at that time. Although the Senate stated from the start that it would not make any concessions, the unions justified their refusal to organise strikes with ongoing wage disputes.

Only in early 2008 did the unions eventually organize isolated warning strikes, although their own strike votes showed that 85.4 percent of their members advocated an open-ended strike. Then came several months of targeted strikes, which were intended to wear down the employees. The Senate then felt sufficiently empowered to unilaterally declare the wage dispute resolved and announced two miserly one-time payments of €300 for the years 2008 and 2009. In response, the unions called for an eight-day strike, which they ended after two days by signing a wage agreement that gave the employees a small basic allowance and a waiving of collective action until the end of 2009.

Outrage at this sell-out was particularly pronounced among teachers. In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site* many of them openly called the deal a betrayal, attacked the unions harshly for their attrition tactics and demonstrated that they had actually lost money through the low wage agreement and losses made during the strike. The GEW reacted by trying to drive a

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wedge between teachers and day care workers and impudently claiming that the dispute had to be cancelled due to lack of a willingness to strike.

Even now the GEW tries the same tricks to keep the opposition against the Senate under control. This September, elections for the state government of Berlin will take place, and the Left Party is particularly worried about its chances of re-election. In this situation, a general struggle for the interests of teachers would muster considerable support from the population. But this is exactly what the GEW is trying to avoid. Their intention is to vent some anger in order to protect the SPD and the Left Party from an uncontrolled social explosion and secure both parties another tenure for new social attacks.

Following the expiry of the 2003 wage agreement the unions and the Senate have stipulated an adjusted wage agreement, which allows for a gradual adjustment to wages over the course of several years. While the Red/Red Senate has proven several times during the last years that it considers treaties only binding if they ensure the profits of the rich and the economy, this agreement will keep their backs covered until the election in September. Although it has been in power since November 2010, the agreement does not stipulate any significant improvements for the employees until the end of August 2011. At the same time, however, it contains a ban on strikes until the end of the year, which is apparently supposed to ensure the Senate's victory in the elections.

But only union officials who have soaked up bureaucracy with their mother's milk could seriously believe that a waiver of labour action could diminish the outrage of the employees. A GEW survey in February has shown that 88 percent of the teachers would participate in strike action during the working hours. More than 78 percent would be prepared for a whole day strike. All the same, the GEW today only calls for a two-hour demonstration followed by a planning meeting "in a smaller hall".

Concerning the content, the demonstration is to be limited to the question of collective regulation of age-appropriate working conditions. Only if they were to succeed in "struggling for our immediate goals of age-appropriate working conditions" could one set sights on more ambitious goals, the appeal of the demonstration states.

GEW Berlin Chairman Rose-Marie Seggelke recently explained in an interview with *Neues Deutschland* that their demands were minimal: "We demand now: One hour less for those older than 55, and a second hour less for those older than 58. We have become modest."

Berlin's Interior Senator Ehrhart Körting (SPD) has already rewarded this modesty with a firm refusal, while Education Senator Jürgen Zöllner threatened protesters with sanctions. The union wants to negotiate with both men.

At the same time, the GEW leaders are already seeking to pin responsibility for a defeat on the employees. A GEW newsletter to the teachers says: "If we do not mobilize ourselves and many of our colleagues … there is no use in thinking about further strike actions." It is actually the GEW that has sabotaged support for the protests. Thus, only teachers have been explicitly called to attend today's demonstration. Other teaching staff and social workers affected by similar cuts have received a letter from the union claiming that the legal framework is so different "that the committee of the GEW Berlin has decided to pursue separate negotiations".

The teachers in Berlin are facing the same problems as the public servants and the state-owned companies. On one side they are confronted with a state government that depicts itself as a "left-wing" alternative to the unsocial policies of the other parties, but is conducting the fiercest attacks on the working and living conditions of the population of Berlin, surpassing those of the most right-wing state governments. On the other side, all their attempts to defend themselves against these attacks are being sabotaged by the unions, who instead of defending the interests of their members, are acting as a "wage police" of the Senate.

It is time to evaluate this record and draw the necessary conclusions. Any trust given to these left-wing parties or the unions, based on their past rhetoric, should be subjected to a critical evaluation. Teachers and other public sector workers in Berlin should form independent committees to defend their interests against the attacks of the Senate. A successful struggle against the policy of the Berlin Senate must be directed against its defence of the capitalist system. This is the basis of all the financial restructuring measures and the constant emphasis on practical constraints. This struggle calls for an international socialist program and a political organization that puts the interests of society as a whole before business profits.

This is the only way to conduct a successful struggle against previous and coming social attacks. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (SEP in Germany), which has fought for such a perspective for decades as the German section of the Fourth International, calls all participants on today's demonstration to discuss these issues and establish contact with us.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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