German university lecturers face poverty wages

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A staggering eighty-five percent of the research and teacher staff in German academic institutions are employed under limited contacts or an effective hire-and-fire policy. Such contracts, integral to the expansion of a low-wage workforce among skilled sectors, is widespread across the 379 universities, technical colleges and art academies in Germany.

Only one-third of the roughly 600,000 employees in German tertiary education have full time jobs. The bulk of research and academic staff is employed in "quarter" or "half posts". Running up to three years at most, these public sector contracts pay abysmally low wages that have been agreed to by the trade unions and Germany's main political parties at a state and federal level.

Systematic and protracted cuts in public spending, particularly within the last decade, have created an army of so-called "discount lecturers" which now constitute the majority of teaching and research staff in German higher education. All are post-graduates, and many have earned doctoral degrees.

Around 20,000 full time jobs have been slashed in the German high school sector. These have been replaced with part-time jobs paying poverty wages. These posts are three to five times cheaper than the cost of fully employing professors to cater to the 2.2 million students currently enrolled Germany-wide.

German education spending is 0.9 percent of its GDP, a percentage considered low by comparison to west European standards. The 36.3 billion euros awarded to German high schools in 2010 is a sum which was long considered minimal to sustain the required educational infrastructure. Over half of the funding comes from the tuition fees that were introduced in a number of German states since 2007 (See "Germany: New university tuition fees threaten students with poverty").

The allocation of funds for public education falls within the sphere of individual federal states. This means that government spending varies greatly from state to state. As a result, universities are encouraged to increase their lobbying for corporate support in order to compete against one another for the limited funds. With authorities arguing there is no money to fund public education, universities are reduced to begging alms from big business.

More than eight thousand academics have been employed as "Special Task Teachers" earning an average monthly income of between 1,000 to 1,300 euros. These jobs are funded either by tuition fees or emergency government funds provided to compensate for the lack of lecturers.

Part-time tutors, an increasing majority in the low-wage academic sector, are often contracted only from semester to semester, with no proper social benefits and paid only for the number of courses held.

According to a limited survey carried out in 2006 by the teachers trade union GEW (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft) in Berlin, at least two-thirds of the 4,000 part-time tutors employed in Berlin higher education institutions earned less than 1,000 Euros a month and were without social benefits. Twenty-five percent of them have not paid for their pensions and six percent lacked any entitlement to health insurance.

What the survey fails to address is the role of the trade unions active in the sphere of education, GEW and Verdi, which have negotiated a series of contracts permitting the state authorities to step up work loads and drive down wages, thereby hugely expanding the sphere of low-pay, or even no-pay ("zero-euro"), labour on German campuses.

Twenty years after German reunification, there is still

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no contract guaranteeing East German teaching staff the same pay as their colleagues doing the same work in the west.

In Berlin, which has been governed for the past decade by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party, the city's Technical University has reportedly employed 163 lecturers last year for zero-euro jobs, most of them freelancing “private lecturers” who are compelled to continue teaching in order to sustain their reputation and work histories, with the hope that at some future point they might earn a salary in academia.

Lena, employed as a Special Task Teacher at a university in the state of North Rhine Westphalia, spoke to the WSWS about her working conditions. “It is often a 24/7 job for me though I am employed in a so called ‘half-position’ of twenty hours,” she said. “As I have this curious clause smuggled into my contract, specifying that I should also allocate 15 percent of my working time on a doctorate, I am not just a lecturer but also considered a researcher. So, the university practically kills two birds with one stone.”

She added, “with three courses in a semester, sometimes with 60 plus students, I have to offer office hours, additional mentoring if needed, prepare and correct exams and module papers, and attend to other diverse administrative tasks when required. In addition, I have to plan course preparation time as we are not allowed to repeat our seminar content, as well as attend to the PhD, which I am expected to finish as a regular candidate within just three years!”

Lena complained that it is often very difficult for her to cope with the workload, especially under time pressures and knowing that her job lacks any security. “It is crazy sometimes to think about all I have to do for just about 1,000 Euros. It costs real energy and day-to-day affirmation to make time for research that one is keen to do, although you know you are exploited to the bone,” she commented.

With the introduction of the Hartz laws ten years ago, the then-SPD-Green Party federal government created an ever-growing low-wage sector encompassing all professional groups.

This sector has since been systematically expanded following the 2008 global economic crisis, with the government and complicit official parties and trade unions undertaking a dramatic reduction in the living standards of millions of workers. Part of this process is the accelerated pauperization of academic workers, tens and thousands of whom could barely subsist on their income—hence their modern pseudonym, “the begging lecturers” (Bettel-Dozenten).

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