

Germany: Thousands of Postbank workers strike

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On December 1-2, roughly 3,500 employees of the German Postbank participated in strikes and protest rallies in the cities of Dortmund and Cologne. On Monday additional strikes and protest rallies took place in Bonn and Hanover. In early November around 1,000 Postbank employees had participated in a demonstration in Hamburg.

The strikes, called by the public sector trade union Verdi, seek to highlight the massive deterioration in working conditions for Postbank workers—including shorter vacations, longer working hours, wage cuts and job losses.

In November 2010 the Postbank and its 20,000 employees was taken over by Deutsche Bank, which acquired a majority holding. Now the bank management is seeking to achieve cost savings at the expense of employees through restructuring and outsourcing certain types of work.

Cost-cutting plans include a reduction of leave from 30 to 27 days per year and pay cuts of up to 30 percent. The work week is to increase in length from 38.5 hours to 42 hours. This will initially apply to about 1,400 clerical workers and affiliated posts in credit servicing, but workers fear that similar measures will be applied to all Postbank employees.

Management also plans to centralise nationally distributed posts in Hameln, Essen and Berlin. According to Verdi, these rationalisations will lead to the loss of 1,500 jobs at Postbank in 2011 and next year.

The strikes led to delays in loan processing and bookings. Inter-bank transactions have also been affected, because Postbank employees also handle

payment transactions for other banks. Postbank took over the processing of payments for Deutsche Bank and Dresdner Bank (now part of Commerzbank) on 1 January 2004, and these activities were relocated to the bank holding centre (BCB).

As with many other strikes and demonstrations in recent weeks—notably at Airbus and Manroland—Postbank employees are taking to the streets to reject attacks by leading companies on their jobs and working conditions, and defend their basic rights.

The unions involved, such as Verdi and engineering union IG Metall, play an altogether different role. They are intent on utilising worker militancy as a lever in their own negotiations with management, to ensure that they play a leading role in the enforcement of attacks on workers and clerical employees.

In a commentary on 30 November 2011, the journalist Eva Roth, who deals with trade union issues for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, wrote on the conflicts in the Postbank: “German companies often manage to rationalise operations or cut jobs without employees taking to the barricades. How do they do it? They hold talks at an early stage with the union and its works councils in order to work out the conditions for the rationalisation process. The management makes the workers’ representatives concessions and in return is guaranteed predictability and tranquillity in the operative process.”

This is an entirely accurate description of the corporatist collaboration between German union and management. The journalist then goes on to accuse Deutsche Bank of betraying this strategy in its

treatment of Postbank. She accuses DB of adopting a confrontation course, instead of fully involving the appropriate trade union (Verdi) and the works councils in order to enforce the proposed cuts on the basis of union-management cooperation.

In fact, Verdi representatives have been negotiating since the beginning of the year with the executive of Deutsche Bank and Postbank on a so-called social contract framework. It is intended to regulate employment conditions, determine which locations will be maintained after the Deutsche Bank takeover, and organize the contracting out of activities as part of the proposed restructuring.

In a letter this February to his “colleagues” at the Deutsche Bank and Postbank, Verdi leader Frank Bsirske, who sits on the Supervisory Board of Postbank, wrote: “In my supervisory work, I have offered constructive cooperation. This implies as a prerequisite that binding regulations are agreed for the protection of the works councils and Verdi. Another prerequisite is timely and comprehensive information and participation in the proposed restructuring.”

Negotiations on the afore-mentioned contract for employees of the Postbank and its subsidiaries have continued during the strikes and protests. They went into the next round at the start of this week.

The danger is that the Verdi trade union and its functionaries will seek to exploit the militancy of Postbank employees merely to protect their own sinecures and privileges in the course of their negotiations with Deutsche Bank management. In recent years, union officials have repeatedly put their signatures to deals involving substantial attacks on jobs and benefits, in the name of “socially acceptable” job cuts.

A company spokesman justified the attack on jobs and working conditions at Postbank by arguing that there was limited demand for the banks’ services. This means that, according to the executive, the bank’s rate of profit is too low.

In addition, Postbank faces “internal competition.” Deutsche Bank is currently considering outsourcing

many of its activities to Prague. If bank workers wanted to avoid this step, then appropriate cuts are necessary. This is the clear message from the executive and the union bureaucrats to Postbank employees.



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