

German public service union continues token strikes

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More than 100,000 public sector workers took part in strikes again last week. The Verdi trade union and public service employers from federal and local administrations will try to reach an agreement in the third round of wage negotiations this week.

Verdi (United Services Union) called for the recent strikes following the second negotiation round on March 12, when employers submitted an initial offer entailing further cuts in real wages for approximately 2 million employees.

The Union of Local Government Employers' Associations (VKA) and the federal government, represented by Federal Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union), submitted no offer at all in the first round. Now they have offered wage and salary increases of 3.3 percent spread over two years. Wages and salaries will rise by 2.1 percent from May and by 1.2 percent from March 2013. But annual price increases will amount to much more than this, and currently stand at 2.3 percent. The employers flatly rejected demands claimed only by specific sections of workers in public utility companies, theatres, savings banks and airports.

Verdi described the offer as unacceptable, insisting on its demand for a 6.5 percent wage increase or at least €200 (US\$265) monthly. At the same time, Verdi head Frank Bsirske signalled willingness to compromise. In a radio interview on *Deutschlandfunk*, he declared the sides would certainly draw closer together in the coming negotiations.

That a second round of token strikes and protests was launched, after the union had claimed that the first wave involved as many as 130,000 employees, has nothing to do with increased militancy on the part of the union leadership. It was driven instead by the sheer anger of the workers. Verdi is warning public employers and the government that the mood among the workers is reaching the boiling point.

The number of people employed in public administrations, official departments, utility and transport companies, theatres, museums, schools, hospitals, etc., has been reduced by almost half over the last 20 years. Wages have stagnated for years and are far behind those in the private sector. More

and more workers are unable to cope on low incomes and have to earn extra cash on the side or apply for additional welfare benefits.

The second wave of strikes beginning last Monday thus drew widespread support again, not only from those directly affected, but also the general public.

Last Wednesday's strike focused on Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia. According to union claims, more than 70,000 employees withdrew their labour. Bus and tram drivers in the state capital of Düsseldorf, Cologne and many cities in the Ruhr region went on strike at the start of the morning shift, paralysing the public transport system. Child day-care centres, swimming pools and city administration offices remained closed all day. Garbage collectors, theatres, banks, job centres, hospitals and nursing homes also took part in the strike. As many as 30,000 people attended a mass rally in Dortmund alone.

On Thursday, the strike was supported by about 17,000 workers in seven federal states—Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, Brandenburg and Berlin.

Addressing a rally in Cologne, Verdi head Bsirske blustered that employers had “the choice between wage increases with purchasing power, and ballots followed by indefinite strikes”. He said employees needed “a significant increase in their real wages”.

This kind of patter is part of the well-known subterfuge by which unions arrange for workers to let off steam, and public employers ultimately enforce planned wage cuts. That was the outcome in the past and the same will happen in this round of collective bargaining. Even if a modest real increase in wages is achieved, the workers themselves will pay for it through government plundering elsewhere. This is what has transpired in recent years, mainly via the imposition of job cuts and increased work stress.

Frank Bsirske and his Verdi functionaries support the austerity measures of the federal and provincial governments, and essentially agree with the public employers that drastic reductions in social spending have to

be made. In alliance with all the Berlin political parties, Verdi advocates a debt brake as the basis for massive social cuts and austerity measures in the public service.

Both sides of the negotiating table are occupied by officials who are among the top salary earners and can always switch sides: from the trade unions into big business and politics, or vice versa. Verdi boss Bsirske is a member of the Greens, and held the post of head of the Hanover personnel department for three years, from 1997 to 2000. In this capacity, he destroyed nearly 1,000 of the 16,000 jobs in the city administration. He then took over the post of chairman of Verdi's predecessor organisation, the ÖTV, from Herbert Mai.

Mai transferred himself from the union to the executive suite of Fraport AG (Frankfurt Airport Services Worldwide), where he assumed the post of personnel manager. Cooperating with Verdi there, he doggedly opposes the demands of air traffic controllers. In his capacity as head of personnel at Fraport, Mai is now also chairman of the airports division of the Union of Municipal Employers' Associations (VKA) and a member of the VKA executive committee. Bsirske and Mai thus face each other across the negotiating table.

In addition to Herbert Mai, another old friend of Bsirske sits on the employers' side of the table: the VKA's president and chief negotiator, Thomas Böhle. Böhle, a member of both Verdi and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), has been head of personnel in Munich since 1998, and thus responsible for about 30,000 of the city's employees. During his first term as the head of VKA, Böhle cooperated with Bsirske and Verdi in 2005 to impose a collective tariff agreement for the public service, involving a massive deterioration in wages and working conditions. "No wonder the two understand each other", commented the *German Financial Times* during the latest round of collective bargaining. This took place as long as two years ago, owing to the long contractual duration of the collective agreement negotiated at the time.

Many other negotiators for the employers are closely in league with Bsirske, either through Verdi or the Greens, the SPD or the Left Party.

Because the fraudulent nature of this game is well understood by workers, the Left Party finds itself forced to churn out a few radical phrases. Klaus Ernst, chairman of the Left Party (and for years one of the many top-earning trade unionists), thus solemnly declared that the public service should no longer be disconnected from other industries when it comes to wages. He claimed that all past wage offers from the employers were "outrageous".

Ernst doubtless remembers that the Berlin Senate, comprised of SPD and Left Party delegates, decided to

withdraw from the Municipal Employers' Association in 2002 in order to subsequently enforce pay cuts in the public services. As a result, a 12 percent wage cut for workers in the transport sector was initially negotiated directly between Bsirske and Harald Wolf (Left Party), the former Berlin economics senator, during a "friendly walk in the woods", and then with Klaus Wowereit (SPD), head of the Berlin city administration. No collective bargaining took place at all.

The SPD and the Greens are trying to exploit the wage dispute in their manoeuvres with the federal government in an attempt to make Chancellor Angela Merkel responsible for the financial misery caused by her team's public budgets. As though the financial bleeding of local municipalities were a phenomenon of only the last two years! Federal and state governments have for decades been foisting additional costs onto the municipalities, gradually driving them into ruin. But the most brutal cuts were imposed by the policies of the SPD-Green government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) from 1998 to 2005. Merkel continued the attacks—including the cementing of the debt brake in the federal constitution—with the SPD until 2009, and then with the FDP (Free Democratic Party).

The municipal administration employers are well aware that Verdi has always supported this policy, and that the union is on their side. This is why VKA President Böhle is so self-confident and arrogant. In an interview with WDR radio on Thursday, he said he had been "unimpressed" with the recent token strikes, and no new offer would be made in the final round of negotiations due to start this Wednesday.



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