

Strikes by German public-sector workers

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Last week more than 100,000 government employees took part in one-day strikes throughout Germany.

Germany's biggest public sector union, Verdi, which is currently negotiating a new contract for some 2 million federal and municipal employees, called the actions. Verdi is demanding a wage increase of 6.5 percent, or at least ?€200 a month, and the employment of all trainee workers. The employers' side refrained from making an offer in the first round of negotiations held last week.

Verdi responded with the call to strike. The limited strikes began March 5 in the states of Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland. A day later, Verdi members stopped work for a day in Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Baden-Württemberg. Last Wednesday, workers went on strike in North Rhine-Westphalia.

The states of Bavaria and Lower Saxony were the focus on Thursday. Numerous kindergartens, day nurseries and crèches closed due to the strikes. Refuse workers also participated, together with workers at parks, environmental works, hospitals, public savings banks and local governments.

In Hanover, where the CeBIT computer fair is currently taking place, buses and trains remained in their depots on Thursday. Disruption to the fair was limited, however. The city commenced its own shuttle bus service and German Railways (DB) provided additional trains. According to Verdi, there were work stoppages, marches and rallies on Thursday in Berlin, Brandenburg, Hesse, Bremen and Baden-Württemberg.

On Friday, the strikes continued in parts of Baden-

Württemberg, Lower Saxony and Bremen.

In calling these strikes Verdi is responding to the pent-up anger of public-sector workers who for years have faced cuts in real wages, job losses and increasing workloads.

The number of employees in German public service has fallen over the last twenty years from around 5.7 million full-time positions in 1991 to just 3.1 million in 2010. The number of part-time employees in the same period increased by more than 1 million.

Public service workers occupy the third lowest place in a scale measuring the movement of wages over the past ten years. Last year alone they had to accept a loss in real wages of 0.6 percent. Verdi writes on its web site: "Due to the losses in real wages, more and more colleagues, especially in the lower salary groups, are forced to accept a part-time job or are dependent on supplementary welfare assistance."

Verdi remains silent over the fact that this state of affairs is first and foremost the result of the union's own policy. As recently as September last year, the outgoing German president, Christian Wulff, praised Verdi at its national convention for its "moderate wage policies over many years."

Opposition is growing, however, amongst workers and union members. Many are voting with their feet and leaving the union. Since 2001, what was once the largest trade union in Europe has lost about a third (900,000) of its members.

Verdi is responding to this pressure with the current series of intermittent strikes. But even in this round of contract bargaining the union is keen to maintain a

close partnership with public employers. Verdi supports the government's policy of a constitutional debt brake, which places an absolute ceiling on state and municipal funding—a policy that also has the support of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens. Since its introduction, this debt brake has provided the basis for massive social cuts and austerity measures in the public services.

Verdi has taken up the task of containing the resistance of workers to the cuts. Despite the strikes and protests, contract negotiations take place in a friendly atmosphere, in part because in many instances Verdi functionaries meet at the table with employer representatives who were themselves long-time officials of the trade union.

Thomas Böhle, the chief negotiator for the municipal employers, is the personnel manager for the Munich city council and for many years a member of both the Social Democratic Party and Verdi. With a doctorate in administration, the lawyer Böhle played an important role seven years ago in the preparation of the co-called TVöD, the current contract agreement for the public sector.

The fact that he has now sharply criticised the strikes, terming them a provocation, is part of the agreed role-playing. In the *Passauer Neuen Presse*, he described the wage demand of his Verdi counterparts as “simply not affordable.” A wage increase of 6.5 percent would cost Bremen an extra ?€9.5 million per year, according to the employers' side. The city treasurer in Duisburg has calculated the extra costs at more than €11 million year.

All of these bureaucrats complain about empty coffers and high levels of debt, knowing full well that all of the German political parties have worked together to provide tax cuts for the rich and big business, while granting massive guarantees and bailouts to the banks. The bill is now to be paid by public-sector workers in the form of cuts in real wages. The broader working class population will pay through the destruction of social infrastructure.

Böhle left open whether the employers intended to

present any sort of offer in the second round of talks. The aim, however, is to arrive at a deal with the unions in the third round of negotiations in late March.

The current round of talks follows the script drawn up in previous years. In 2010, Verdi began negotiations with a demand for a five percent increase in wages—a figure already far below the expectations of members. The union then called for strikes in order to permit workers to let off steam. Eventually it joined the public sector employers in arbitration. Verdi went on to accept an unusually long contract period of 26 months and an increase in wages over that time span of 2.3 percent, i.e., just over one percent on an annual basis.



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