

Protest strike by teachers in Berlin

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Some 8,000 teachers were called out on a one-day protest strike in Berlin on Tuesday, April 23. One day later, the public sector union Verdi met with the Berlin state Interior Minister Frank Henkel to negotiate teachers' pay in Berlin.

The protest strike is aimed at giving the appearance of a fight, while behind the scenes a further deterioration in teachers' conditions is being negotiated. Under no circumstances will the protest strike help to improve the situation of teachers, or resolve the problems confronting the education sector. A brief review of the recent history makes this clear.

In early March, the teachers' unions, the GEW and Verdi, once again left teachers in the lurch. At the conclusion of their negotiations with the state governments' association the unions abandoned the call for a uniform national payment scheme for non-tenured teachers linked to the—still—slightly better salaries of tenured teachers.

This sell-out, following weeks of strikes and protests, marked the initial endpoint of a development which stretches back the past 20 years, during which the situation of both tenured and non-tenured teachers has steadily deteriorated.

The accumulated anger of teachers was so great that the GEW in the state of Saxony, which exclusively employs non-tenured teachers, was forced to conduct “de-escalation visits” to schools.

In mid-April, after the Easter holidays, the GEW then announced a national “strategic change”. The new strategy confirms the division of teachers: the union declared that instead of negotiations at a federal level it would negotiate separately with administrations at a state level.

The union justified the U-turn by citing the “large number of individual interests” and “highly different concerns on individual questions” on the part of various state governments. The same applies to the GEW itself,

the union argued, whose state associations confront “different challenges due to the deterioration in the current pay and career regulations of individual states”.

There could not be a clearer rejection of the principle of “equal pay for equal work”.

“Different concerns in individual questions” can be used to justify divisions not only at state level but also by local authorities, neighbourhoods, and eventually individual schools. After all, are they not all differently affected as a result of “individual questions”, such as their catchments area?

The GEW discussion paper reads: “The need to conduct negotiations to reach a ‘collective agreement for the grading of teachers in state schools and universities’ with policy-makers, with the participation of the ministries, compels the negotiations in the states to be held with the respective political leaders and thereby allow state legislatures to influence policy.”

To build hopes on any kind of positive influence by the state legislatures seems absurd at first glance. Following the contract agreement in March, almost all the state governments officially announced that they will continue their policy of education cuts. They do not want the meager wage increases agreed for ordinary public sector employees to be passed onto those with civil service status, such as tenured teachers.

The Social Democratic Party-Green Party government in the state of North Rhine Westfalia and the Green-SPD government in Baden-Württemberg are the pioneers here. Even Berlin's state finance minister Nussbaum has already explicitly excluded the transfer of the contract agreement to state officials, although their pay scales are the worst compared to all other federal states.

This orientation to state-level politics can only be interpreted as an attempt by GEW and Verdi officials to strengthen their own position at the expense of their members.

The Berlin state government initially denied this suggestion and stated that it would not negotiate with the GEW on the grading of teachers. Accordingly, finance minister Nussbaum filed an injunction against the April 23 protest strike with the Berlin Regional Labour Court. However, the Labour Court rejected the application and allowed the action to take place.

One day later, on April 24, Verdi held its “top political officials discussion” with the Berlin state interior affairs administration headed by Frank Henkel.



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