

Germany: 24-hour warning strikes in public sector

Our reporters
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A 24-hour warning strike on Wednesday saw public sector workers down tools throughout large parts of the state of Hesse. The action was preceded by well-supported lightning strikes in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia. According to the public sector union Verdi, some 110,000 participated in the strikes.

The first round of the current contract negotiations covering more than 2 million federal and local government workers that began in Potsdam on March 13 ended without a deal. Federal interior minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) described the union demands as “grossly excessive” and made no counteroffer.

The Verdi union is demanding a wage rise of €100 plus 3.5 percent and an additional allowance for trainees, as well as a guarantee that apprentices will be offered permanent jobs. The second negotiating round began on Thursday.

Two years ago, the union had demanded a rise of 6.5 percent and a minimum increase of €200. In the end, it settled for a rise of around 3 percent, equating to an increase barely above the rate of inflation, which in no way compensated for years of cuts in real wages. At the same time, workers lost one day’s holiday.

For Verdi, the latest lightning strikes are a means of allowing workers to let off steam, while the union strikes a similar shabby deal with the employers that has probably already been stitched up. The strikes are an attempt to cover over the union’s role as co-managers and attract new dues-paying members, since only members receive strike pay.

Many workers are no longer willing to accept these wages diktats. They are demanding a clear improvement of their social situation, which has been constantly eroded over recent years through cuts in real wages, rising rents and prices.

In Frankfurt, the most populous city in Hesse, public transport was virtually paralysed, affecting some half-a-million commuters. The strike hit the subway system, trams and buses, with only the suburban rail system run by Deutsche Bahn operating. Also hit were day nurseries, garbage collection, water and sewage plants, health clinics, theatres and many other city-run enterprises.

Many workers from the city’s environmental services also took part in the strike and attended the rally. As one reported, the money they currently receive for their work does not last till the end of the month. He said he has just €1,200 a month, but has to pay €550 for rent alone. “You’re lucky!” his colleague interjected. “A small apartment in Frankfurt, even a small three-room one, normally costs double. What’s left after paying that?”

Teachers and child carers also expressed their anger. Marlene, who has worked for 12 years in a city-run day nursery, reported that younger colleagues are only paid a gross wage of about €2,200 a month. “And that is after five years’ training!” she added.

Those looking after the disabled get a very raw deal. An example is Mr. Steinmetz, who earns €1,048 net a month, while paying €500 in rent. He works for CeBeeF, a club for disabled people and their friends, which has several hundred employees. He noted that the level of his wages “is quite usual for people who work on the front line with the disabled”.

CeBeeF is a charity that depends on funding from the Frankfurt city government, and is a victim of its cuts policy. Recently, new hires have no longer been offered a permanent contract.

Two years ago, Verdi agreed to a new contract that amounted to a cut in real wages of 10 percent. “And that’s not all”, said Mr. Steinmetz. The charity did not

even pay this amount. “On a discretionary basis”, he said, “they arbitrarily paid even less, so that on average we receive about 70 percent of the union rate.”

Wednesday’s strike was also supported by nurses and hospital workers at city-run clinics, who face an uncertain future.

Since the Offenbach Clinic was recently sold to a private operator for just €1, mass sackings have followed. The Höchst Clinic is being amalgamated with the Main-Taunus Clinic. The declared aim is that city-run clinics are to be operated on a “more economic basis”, meaning job cuts and more work for those remaining.

The speaker from Verdi had no answer to these catastrophic working conditions, as it is the union that is responsible for these cuts in wages and jobs. The pathetic words about the “good wages” were interpreted by many workers at the rally as pure hypocrisy.

Members of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) circulated an article from the *World Socialist Web Site* about the current events in Ukraine and the dangers of war. As it states, “The aggressive foreign policy is closely related to the intensification of the attacks on the working class in Germany and throughout Europe. Since the financial crisis of 2008, Berlin has dictated austerity measures and labour market policies for the EU, forcing large parts of the population to work harder and harder for diminishing wages.”

Strikers responded very positively to the article, saying it was good to actually find out something more accurate about the background to the conflict in Ukraine. One child carer stated: “It’s really scary what we are heading towards here in Germany, and all around the world, at present.”



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