

German public service contract: Teachers sold out once again

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1 April 2015

After four rounds of negotiations and a series of warning strikes, the services trade union Verdi, the German Professionals Union, and the education and science trade union (GEW) reached agreement last Saturday on a pay deal for 800,000 public service workers employed by the German states. The deal covers workers in public services and authorities, street cleaners, firefighters, police, nurses and teachers.

The agreement codifies the principle of unequal pay for equal work in eastern and western Germany, and above all between teachers employed as civil servants and those employed as contracted employees.

The agreement runs for 24 months. Retrospectively to March 1, 2015, workers will receive a 2.1 percent wage increase, and a further increase of 2.3 percent in March 2016, with a minimum increase of €75. During the same period, trainees will receive €30 more per year and an additional day off.

This minimal increase will not only be reduced by inflation, but also by additional employee contributions to an elderly care programme. In the future, employees will have to pay extra contributions, even after the end of the contract in 2016. In the west, the contribution will rise this year from 1.41 percent to 1.61 percent of total wages, and a further 0.3 percent increase is due in 2016 and 0.4 percent in 2017.

In eastern Germany, employees will pay even more. Contributions are already at 2 percent and will rise in the coming years by 0.75 percent, meaning that in 2017, the rate will be 4.25 percent. Unequal pay in the east and west has thereby been permanently codified, at least where the trade union officials and state governments are concerned. Workers in eastern Germany will not be helped by the promise that their Christmas bonus will be equal to that in western Germany in five years!

Originally, Verdi demanded a pay increase of 5.5 percent over 12 months, with a minimum increase of €175. The cuts to care for the elderly demanded by the states' collective bargaining association were rejected by Verdi, DBB and GEW.

Nonetheless, Verdi chairman Frank Bsirske (Green Party) and the DBB chairman Villi Russ praised the agreement. Bsirske described the settlement as "acceptable on balance."

TdL lead negotiator Jens Bullerjahn (Social Democrats) was

also satisfied. The finance minister in Saxony Anhalt described the agreement as "reasonable and responsible in this context."

The context is that in 2014, the federal government, states and municipalities achieved a budgetary surplus of €18 billion, the highest in 14 years. All states were agreed that public service employees should not benefit from this.

Contract negotiations for the public sector are always a deceitful exercise. The trade union officials are closer to the public service employers than to the workers they allegedly represent. They often belong to the same political parties and frequently shift from positions in the trade unions to high posts in the public service. Bsirske was a human resources director for the city of Hannover before he moved to the leadership of Verdi in 2000.

His counterpart in the negotiations, Saxony Anhalt's finance minister Bullerjahn, is not just a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), a party that includes many leading trade union officials. He is also a member of the EGBCE trade union, as he recently underscored in an interview with a regional newspaper.

Teachers sold out once again

The unequal pay for teachers is particularly crass and unjust. The approximately 200,000 contract teachers receive much lower wages than their civil servant colleagues, and work under conditions that are considerably worse. According to GEW, the average wage difference is €320. But even among contract teachers there are huge differences. In eastern Germany they are generally placed one or two wage levels below their colleagues in western Germany.

Most states make use of temporary contracts so as to pay teachers merely for teaching time in the classroom. During the school holidays they are then unemployed, even if they spend time preparing and reviewing lessons.

Contract teachers have been struggling for years to be treated equally. They are extremely combative and have been called out in the tens of thousands on warning strikes during

negotiations over several years. And for years they have been regularly sold out.

GEW, which represents contract teachers, demanded within the framework of the teaching personnel reward regulation (L-EGO) a so-called parallel table: contracted teachers who undertook the same tasks as their civil servant colleagues in remuneration group A12 should in the future receive the E12 rate of pay instead of E11. A11 was to correspond to E11, and so on.

At first the states did not want to make an equitable offer, and ultimately presented a monthly pay increase of €30 from August 2016 for specific groups of teachers as providing access to the parallel table. The states refused to name a concrete timeframe within which this process would be completed. Since the TdL's offer on teachers' wages ran until 2018, teachers would have had to accept this for the coming four years.

The GEW was the only trade union to reject this proposal. By contrast, the GEW federal collective bargaining commission voted in favour of the agreement on remuneration and increased contributions to elderly care. The results were "acceptable."

Bsirske took a hostile position towards the teachers. Responding to the question of further strikes by teachers, the Verdi leader said that he would not support the teachers and they would have to strike alone. They had opposed the compromise, so they had to "suffer the consequences", he said.

The DBB also stabbed the contract teachers in the back. Deputy chairman of the DBB's federal collective bargaining commission, Jens Weichelt, told MDR radio, "We were disappointed to return once again without a result."

Contract teachers have once again been left out in the cold. To enforce their demand for equal pay, they have to strike across the country in every state. It is doubtful that the GEW will act any differently on this occasion than it has in the past and call strikes. "GEW now has to consider strategically as to how it will handle this issue in the future," wrote the union on its web site.

Its opposition to the deal on the remuneration of teaching personnel is not of a principled character. GEW has only tactical differences with Verdi and DBB and has accepted similar sell-outs in previous bargaining rounds. But the union is under greater pressure from its members. The complete acceptance of the collective agreement would have provoked a mass exodus from the union, resulting in declining sources of income.

The GEW's web site demonstrates that the union feared this. Immediately after the deal, the GEW responded to questions such as: "Why did we bother going out on the streets at all?" and "Are we contract teachers still adequately represented by GEW?"

Their responses are miserable and point to their hostility towards the membership. They sought to present as a success that "the issue of L-EGO was high on the agenda during negotiations and also in media reports on the bargaining

round," along with additional elderly care, which played "the main role." This was "solely and alone thanks to a strong GEW." But unfortunately...and so on.

One could feel sympathy towards this admission of bankruptcy if not for the fact that the working and living conditions of 200,000 teachers, hundreds of thousands of other workers and their families are at stake.

Anger is running high among trade union members over the latest result. One wrote on the GEW web site, "I am bitterly disappointed with my previous union, Teachers NRW. I will leave as soon as the strike pay for the two days is in my account." And on a Verdi members' blog, a member wrote of being a member for over 30 years: "I am seriously asking myself if Verdi has earned my trust."

GEW responded by making the members, rather than themselves, Verdi or the DBB, responsible for this bankruptcy. The massive pressure built up by the tens of thousands of strikers over the past few weeks was "obviously not great enough." It was necessary to carry on and prove a readiness for the long haul. "To weaken GEW and its ability to apply pressure by leaving is the wrong move."

In the coming weeks, the trade union members will vote on the acceptance of the deal resulting from the negotiations. The WSWs calls upon all Verdi and GEW members to reject the sell-out by the trade unions and to vote no.

Two years ago, when GEW and the other trade unions organised a similar sell-out, we wrote, "Because the trade unions have long ago become part of this social order, they offer nothing in resistance. Their officials live on confining the resistance of the workers and diverting it. Protests and work stoppages increasingly have a purely symbolic ritual, or serve to cover up a further worsening of conditions being negotiated behind the scenes."

"A break with the old organisations is necessary, and the adoption of a new orientation appropriate for the depth and extent of the current crisis of society. Such a policy cannot be limited to reforms, but must make the abolition of capitalism its goal."

These words are even more appropriate today.



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