

German child care workers vote for strike action

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The fifth round of negotiations failed last Tuesday in the wage conflict involving 240,000 child care workers and social pedagogical staff in municipal child day care centres and institutions for young people. GEW and Verdi, the two trade unions involved, subsequently cancelled the sixth round planned for May 11-12 and called on their members to hold an authorisation vote for an unlimited strike.

Over recent weeks, tens of thousands of child care workers and pedagogical staff have shown their readiness to fight in a series of one-day warning strikes and protests. On Monday, 12,000 workers gathered in Stuttgart. They are demanding that their jobs be categorised in a higher grouping, which would mean a greater value would be placed on their work. According to the trade unions, this would equate to a wage increase of 10 percent.

In spite of the increased difficulties facing parents on strike days to accommodate their children, most have shown their solidarity with the child care workers' struggle.

According to the association of municipal employers' organisations (VKA), the higher classification would result in additional costs of €1.2 billion. This would not be manageable for the municipalities, it stated, and it is already threatening to offload these additional costs onto parents by increasing kindergarten charges.

In the fifth round of talks, only minor improvements for certain groups of carers were offered, for example to those involved in inclusion programmes for children with disabilities, or language support, or for the heads of larger kindergartens. This offer, aimed at dividing child care workers into different groups, is a zero-sum game, since the funding for language support came through cuts to the financing of the integration of migrant children and those with disabilities into regular

kindergartens.

Child care employees have been confronted with continuous cost-cutting programmes and a massive increase in the demands placed upon them for years. Kindergartens are chronically understaffed, group sizes far too large, and child-carers, in spite of tremendous efforts, are hardly in a position to provide each child with the best pedagogical care.

In a study by the Bertelsmann Foundation, a ratio of carers to children of 1 to 3 for children below three years of age was recommended, and not greater than 1 to 7.5 for children over age three. According to the foundation, achieving this ratio would require the hiring of an estimated additional 120,000 child care workers nationwide.

The GEW's reports reflect the reality, suggesting that one carer has to look after 15 children in the three-to-six-years-of-age group and approximately nine children in the under-three age group. At times of sickness, or when colleagues take holidays, carers can be left to take care of groups of 20 three-to-six-year-olds. This is particularly so in the east of the country, where a well-established child care system was destroyed 25 years ago after the collapse of the GDR.

In addition, extra responsibilities for child care staff were adopted following the expansion in 2005 of child care places for children under age three. For example, staff are obligated to produce documentation on the development of each child and hold consultations with parents.

Despite having studied for five years and carrying out demanding work, child care workers are paid much less than primary school teachers, with wages stagnating at 1991 levels. Most only have part-time contracts and, after physically draining work, have only around €1,000 in their pockets at the end of the month.

According to figures from GEW, only around half of all child care workers have a full-time contract, allowing them to obtain the wages reported in the media of €2,500 per month. Depending on family circumstances, this often amounts to net pay of not much more than €1,500.

Along with kindergartens, municipal social and child care also includes medical child care, workplaces for the disabled, day care centres for adults, care homes and child and young people's psychotherapy. To date, the strikes have been concentrated in the 17,500 publicly run kindergartens. However, more than 35,000 facilities operate nationwide, run by private and church organisations, such as Caritas or workers' welfare, employing around 500,000 people. These institutions are not involved in the wage dispute, and most workers employed by them are paid even less.

Child care workers do not only confront the municipal employers' association. Their justified demand for a re-evaluation of their work with children and young people is in direct opposition to the entire policy of the ruling elite, which is aimed at enriching a tiny minority at the expense of working people and their families. The increased tax intake at the federal and state levels is being used to expand the security apparatus and build up the military and police, not for socially important services such as child care, education, health care or public transport.

The trade unions are also not on the side of child care workers and social pedagogues. The low wages in the sector are linked to the TVÖ collective agreement concluded by Verdi in 2005 for public sector workers, which contained a number of reductions compared to the previous arrangement. For example, if workers change jobs, they lose their old classification and thereby any recognition of their professional experience. This has led to repeated expressions of anger in the trade union discussion forums.

Verdi has also signed off on job cuts at the state and municipal level. The union's call now for strikes is above all aimed at serving their own interests. Verdi is attempting to counter the loss of members over recent years and to maintain its position as negotiator at the federal and state level, on which their well-paid jobs on company boards depend. The trade unions firmly reject a joint struggle of all workers employed in essential social services, including workers in child care, the

postal service and transport, as well as teachers and nurses.



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