

Nationwide strike by child care workers in Germany

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14 May 2015

Since Friday, around 40,000 workers in social and childcare services have been participating in an unlimited strike called by the trade unions ver.di, GEW and DBB (Professionals' Association). Prior to this, five rounds of negotiations with municipal employers' groups had failed, and an initial vote at the beginning of May in favour of strike action secured over 90 percent support (93.4 percent from ver.di and 96 percent from the DBB).

As well as childcare workers, social workers in schools for disabled children and work programmes for the disabled and social pedagogues in schools, youth centres and children's homes are involved in the strike. Their demands equate to a wage increase of 10 percent. According to trade union leaders, this is to be achieved by categorising the professionals at a higher level on the pay scale within the child and social care sector.

The employers have rejected the demand outright, because it would supposedly mean increased costs of €1.2 billion. "Unaffordable," was how Thomas Böhle of the Association of Municipal Employers (VKA) described the demand, while the VKA's lead business manager Manfred Hoffmann told the *Rheinische Post* online, "Childcare workers are in a good financial position."

The reality is that in many cases, the wage for childcare workers is insufficient to sustain a decent standard of living, especially in large cities like Frankfurt, Cologne and Hamburg. According to the Hans-Böckler Foundation, average wages are at €2,540 gross per month in western Germany, and €2,340 in eastern Germany.

Childcare workers are suffering under increased stress and duties at work even more so than from their low wages. The care teams are chronically understaffed and the groups of children too large, while the demand for education is increasing. Their militancy is therefore considerable, as the WSWs found in Frankfurt during discussions with childcare workers on the first day of the strike.

"Our institution has been overbooked for two years," said Ann-Katrin Widkowski, who works in the childcare facility run by a workers' welfare organisation (AWO) in Frankfurt. The institution, which is included in the municipal collective pay agreement, has 16 kindergartens and nurseries. Ann-Katrin thought that the failure to make an offer to the workers in five rounds of talks showed a lack of respect by the employers.

"The importance of education is being pointed out everywhere, but we don't get anything. My training took five years. Now, I earn so little that I have to work a second job at a petrol station to make ends meet. Yet our work as childcare providers is extremely demanding."

A ratio of children to care providers of 7.5-1 should apply, according to Ann-Katrin, but this is not the case. Currently in an AWO kindergarten, a professional childcare worker cares for a group of 20 children together with a trainee.

"The numbers in the groups have been increased for us," reported another care provider who works in an after school centre. "Three childcare providers look after between 45 and 50 children, and sometimes there are only two of us and we have to prepare food at the same time." Frequently only two care providers are in the building if someone is ill or absent for other reasons. When children are involved, it is very hard to refuse overtime, she continued. "The recognition of preparation time away from the workplace was also cut."

The burden is particularly great in the inclusive institutions, as the childcare worker Ursula explained. She works with 15 children, five of whom have additional special needs.

"This includes epileptic children. In total there are four of us: three trained childcare providers and a trainee. We really have to do everything, for example changing the tube for children who have to be fed through a tube. Although we don't have any specialist training, we carry

huge responsibilities.”

These children are not allowed to drink anything, she said. “So no other child can give them a cup of water. We constantly have to keep a check on that.”

10 percent more pay, at minimum, is something which is urgently necessary, Ursula continued, if only to interest more people in the profession. “We work on a high level, offer a qualitatively high-value education programme. For example, we use the music teaching programme Primacanta, and a special type of observation learning known as Mattemeo.”

Requirements have increased as a whole and pressure is building on the workers. “The government set the requirement for education high, but our wages make it difficult for us to cover basic living costs in Frankfurt,” Ursula concluded.

The striking childcare workers and social pedagogues are extremely motivated. But they confront a major problem: if their struggle remains under the control of the trade unions, its failure is guaranteed.

The trade unions have collaborated for years in implementing the poor conditions under which childcare workers currently suffer. All of the contracts detailing job cuts and conditions of work at the state and municipal levels were signed off by ver.di and the GEW.

Many of the trade union leaders are members of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Left Party, and through these parties they have close ties to the municipal employers’ organisations. For example, ver.di negotiator Achim Meerkamp, like the Federal Minister for Labour and Social Issues Andrea Nahles and Families Minister Manuela Schwesig, is an SPD member. Ver.di leader Frank Bsirske is a member of the Greens. From 1997 to 2000 he was responsible for the elimination of one in six jobs in the city of Hannover, before subsequently switching to lead the trade union.

The current childcare strike is not the first. In early summer 2009, over 200,000 workers in childcare and social services struck nationwide for several weeks. They demanded a reversal of the setbacks imposed by the move to new contracts. The dissolution of the collective agreement for federal employees (BAD) and its replacement by the public service agreement (TVÖ) and the collective agreement for states (TVL) resulted in drastic wage cuts in 2005.

The trade unions deliberately sold out that strike, as lead negotiator Meerkamp admitted in Frankfurt on Monday. “We know that in 2009, we had to agree a compromise. The compromise was necessary, because at the time we

were hit by a financial crisis.”

Meerkamp has been a leading trade union official since his early 20s, and a member of ver.di’s national executive for eight years. He occupies many well-paid posts on supervisory boards, including at energy firm RheinEnergie AG.

There is no reason to expect ver.di and GEW to act any differently this time around. At that time, the agreement allowed the cities and municipalities to offload their budget crises onto the workers. This time, the public sector employers are providing hosts of reasons for savings in the area of social services. They include the debt break; supported by the SPD, Greens and in all essentials, the Left Party; the long-term impact of the economic crisis and the current military build-up which is costing billions.

The current childcare strike makes clear that the role of ver.di, GEW and the DBB is to maintain control of the workers. Of a total of over a quarter of a million professionals, only 40,000 in municipal social services and childcare were called out on strike. Private and church institutions, and those under the TVL agreement, were excluded from the strike from the outset, for example affecting kindergartens in Berlin.

In the midst of the current struggles by train drivers, postal, telecommunication and Postbank workers, airport staff, teachers, nurses and care providers, Karstadt retail workers, Amazon staff, midwives, psychotherapists and many other professional groups, an extremely well-refined plan has been put in place to prevent a joint strike.

GEW, ver.di and the entire German trade union confederation (DGB) are not aiming for a victory because they are props of the bourgeois order. This is made explicitly clear by the support of DGB and ver.di for the German army and militarism. As ver.di leader and Green Party member Bsirske declared with regard to the army’s massive recruiting campaign, “For ver.di it is also understandable that joining the army be promoted.”

It is thus not particularly surprising that already on the second day of the strike, Bsirske’s office released a statement declaring, “If the VKA makes a genuine offer, the unlimited strikes could be called off with a day’s notice.”



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