

# German ver.di trade union calls off childcare workers strike

Marianne Arens  
9 June 2015

“I feel betrayed,” states a blog entry on a ver.di members’ network. This expresses the sentiment of many childcare workers after ver.di head Frank Bsirske called off the strike of kindergarten workers on June 4 and agreed to arbitration.

“We were told that there would be a strike until a result through negotiations was achieved,” the blog entry goes on to say. “That our own trade union has stabbed us in the back after four weeks of strikes and solidarity is unbelievable to me. I am extremely angry. Who is the real strike-breaker now?”

Another blog entry reads: “One can’t send tens of thousands onto the street with justified demands only to lead them down a blind alley. And this isn’t even the first time the trade unions have capitulated to the VKA (Association of Municipal Employers) or accepted the unpalatable compromises that we are putting up with today.”

Among the strikers, there is an entirely justified mistrust of the approaching arbitration proceedings. “I already consider whatever is sprung upon us at the arbitration to be a joke,” one blogger writes, “and in my opinion, arbitration will not result in an outcome that will lead to reevaluation as we understand it. I am convinced of that.”

The main aim of arbitration is to break off the strike, since labour peace is mandatory during the proceedings. Ver.di immediately announced that all childcare workers would be back at work Monday morning.

“Why have we been striking for the past four weeks?” many are asking.

The anger over ver.di’s decision is even greater, because the strike received significant support across the country and was carried out with considerable enthusiasm. Well over 90 percent of union members

voted in favour of a strike in the authorisation vote. Hundreds of thousands participated in rallies. At the most recent demonstrations, in Frankfurt on May 28 and Düsseldorf on June 2, 20,000 people came, twice as many as expected.

Many parents affected by the strike declared their solidarity with the childcare workers even though the walkout compelled them to make other childcare arrangements. Most described the demands of the strike as entirely justified.

The main demand was for a wage increase, to be achieved by moving the 240,000 workers in social care and childcare into a higher pay category. According to the Hans Böckler Foundation, the current average wage is around €2,540 gross per month in western Germany and €2,340 in the east. In addition to childcare workers, social workers at schools for disabled children and work placement, and social teachers at schools, youth services and children’s homes took part in the strike.

The trade unions—ver.di, GEW and DBB—explicitly promised to continue the unlimited nationwide strike under the slogan “reevaluate!” until the demands were met. Just 10 days ago, ver.di’s Bsirske declared, “This strike will continue, without limits, until an acceptable result is achieved.”

In reality, ver.di was working hand in glove from the outset with the municipal employers’ organisations against the strikers. Bsirske made it clear on several occasions that he wanted a quick end to the strike. He was cited by *Zeit Online* last Tuesday as saying, “We want to do everything now to come to a joint agreement in the negotiations so that we can end the strike.” According to *Handelsblatt*, Bsirske said he wanted to “reach a compromise ... in the next two days to end the strike.”

The municipal employers had made clear that they

would not accept the strikers' demands. For over a year, the VKA has firmly opposed a general increase in wages in social service and childcare.

The VKA offered small increases for specific areas of activity. The last offer on May 28 included a higher categorisation and increased premiums for some workers, equal to between €40 and €50 per month. For the vast majority of social workers and childcare workers, no improvement was proposed.

VKA President Thomas Böhle, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), claimed recently that the unions' demands were too high and could not be financed by the municipalities. He added that he was confident ver.di would accept the outcome of arbitration.

To cover its tracks, ver.di called on childcare workers to hold toothless protests during arbitration and a requirement for "labour peace" by wearing red strike vests to work, writing letters to parents, and visiting local politicians and the offices of the local employer.

But the double-dealing between ver.di and the municipal employers cannot be concealed. This was confirmed in the selection of the arbitrators, guaranteeing that the result will be a rotten sellout. The VKA appointed the former president of the state of Saxony, Georg Milbradt, a Christian Democrat, while the unions chose former Hannover mayor Herbert Schmalstieg of the SPD.

Both worked on an arbitration ruling for public-sector workers at the federal and municipal levels in 2010 that was accepted by the bargaining parties. The ruling imposed a de facto cut in real wages. Though ver.di began with a demand for five percent more pay, in the end it accepted a wage rise of 1.2 percent and signed up to a 26-month contract.

Bsirske's appointment of Hannover's longtime mayor as the unions' arbitrator says a great deal. The two know one another well from their collaboration in Hannover. Schmalstieg was Bsirske's deputy between 1997 and 2000, when the latter led the human resources department of the city of Hannover.

Under Bsirske's leadership, approximately 1,000 public-sector jobs out of a total of 16,000 were eliminated in the state capital of Lower Saxony. Schmalstieg and Bsirske began the transformation of the public service into what was called a "modern and cost-efficient business to provide services." In other

words, they initiated the ongoing campaign of social attacks.

When the strike began four weeks ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: "The striking childcare workers and social educators 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 unions have collaborated for years in imposing the deplorable conditions under which childcare workers currently suffer. All of the contracts providing for job cuts and attacks on working conditions at the state and municipal levels were signed by ver.di and the GEW."

This assessment has been fully confirmed.

The four-week childcare workers strike was part of a broader strike wave. Just a few hours after the strike was called off, postal workers announced an unlimited strike. They are also organised in ver.di.

In addition, there have been workplace actions by airport staff, teachers, nurses and care-givers, Karstadt retail workers, Amazon employees, midwives and psychotherapists and other groups.

Ver.di is seeking to avert a joint struggle by all means, because such a movement would quickly be transformed into a political struggle against the German government. This is a major reason why the union sought to end the childcare workers strike as quickly as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**