

The role of the trade unions in the German childcare workers' strike

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The German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) held rallies in four cities on Saturday. A leaflet promoting the rallies declares that the day of action is to support the struggle for a contract by workers in social and childcare services. But the opposite is the case. The rallies are the prelude to the sellout of the childcare workers strike, which was sent to arbitration last Wednesday.

A glance at the speaker's list makes this clear. The DGB invited government representatives to speak, offering them a platform to justify their opposition to the childcare workers' demands. The same parties which as public sector employers vehemently resist the workers' demands spoke at the DGB's rally.

Sigmar Gabriel spoke in Hannover. The chairman of the Social Democrats (SPD) is the economics minister and Vice Chancellor. He is directly responsible for the social attacks in the public sector and the miserable working conditions faced by many employees. His party colleague Thomas Böhle is President of the association of municipal employers' organisations (VKA), which has been firmly opposed to the kindergarten workers' demands for weeks.

In Cologne, Christian Democrat (CDU) politician Matthias Zimmer addressed the rally. He heads the CDU's social services committee and represents the government's line. In Nuremberg, Michael Kellner, the Greens' federal whip, whose party sits in eight governments at the state level and implements social attacks, attended, and in Dresden, Katja Kipping, chairwoman of the Left Party, spoke.

The Left Party distinguishes itself from the other parties solely through its greater degree of cynicism. Where it holds positions in government, it pursues social attacks, but when it is in the opposition, it criticises them. Since the Left Party won the post of

state premier in Thuringia, it has been striving to enter government at the federal level, indicating in the process that it is willing to collaborate with all parties.

All parties support the debt brake, which forces the municipalities to make ever-deeper social cuts. In recent years, hundreds of billions were made available to bail out the banks. These billions are now being squeezed out of the population by massive budget cuts, wage reductions and social attacks at the municipal level, while the financial elite is swimming in money.

By inviting government representatives to speak at its rallies, the DGB is making clear that it supports these policies. This is why the ver.di and GEW trade unions were unwilling to lead a genuine struggle for the childcare workers' legitimate demands. The militancy among the workforce remains great. In early May, over 90 percent voted in favour of a strike.

But ver.di, GEW and the professionals association (DBB) limited the strike from the outset to a symbolic gesture. From a total of around 240,000 workers in this area of the public sector, only 40,000 employees in social and childcare services were called out on strike. Employees of private or church institutions as well as those workers under the collective agreement of states (TVL) were excluded from the struggle from the start.

As the strike began to have an impact in spite of this, and some employers' organisations began to apply pressure on the government, ver.di halted the strike after just four weeks and agreed to an arbitration process. Ver.di head Frank Bsirske noted that during arbitration, the principle of labour peace was in force, and no strike would be permitted.

He was determined to prevent the kindergarten strike joining up with other workers' struggles being mounted at Deutsche Post, by telecommunications workers, Postbank employees, train drivers, airport

workers, teachers, nurses and carers, Karstadt workers, Amazon employees and many other groups. The ver.di head is seeking to avert at all costs the development of a broad strike movement coming into conflict with the government.

Faced with growing opposition in the factories and public sector, ver.di and the other trade unions are more and more openly siding with the government against the workers. With the invitation to Gabriel and other party representatives, the alliance of the unions with the government is increasingly obvious.

The integration of governments and trade unions is an international phenomenon. It has deep objective roots. It is directly connected with the deepening global crisis of capitalism and the European Union. The German government is responding to this crisis with an extreme intensification of exploitation and with the revival of German militarism.

Since announcing the end of military restraint last year, the government has launched a massive military build-up. This has been accompanied by major attacks on social and democratic rights. At Berlin's Humboldt University, students are coming under attack for criticising the militarist positions of professors. To secure the billions required for weaponry and new weapons systems, the social cuts that have been pursued for years are being intensified still further.

This connection is very clear in the childcare workers' strike. The municipal employers' organisations have noted at every opportunity that the municipalities and states have no money. For this reason it is impossible to fulfill the strikers' demands. At the same time, defence minister Ursula Von der Leyen (CDU) announced the development of a new missile system and a new warship for the German army. Each project will cost €4 billion.

Already at the beginning of March, parliament agreed to an €8.7 billion deal with Airbus for helicopters. Shortly thereafter, the German army launched a new submarine worth €500 million. At the end of May, the defence minister announced the joint development of a drone with France and Italy, as well as the production of a new tank.

According to the VKA, fulfilling the childcare workers' demands would cost €1.2 billion. This is only a fraction of the costs currently planned for military rearmament.

The drastic increase of military spending at the expense of social services recalls the period prior to World War II. In 1928, the SPD conducted an election campaign under the slogan "Feed children instead of battleships" against militarism and rearmament, winning a significant increase in votes. But shortly after the SPD's Hermann Müller had been elected Chancellor, the SPD overruled the voters, agreeing to funds for the battleships and imposing drastic social cuts by means of emergency decrees.

At the time, the government, a grand coalition, collaborated closely with the trade unions, which subordinated the working class to the state and its imperialist interests. The consequences are well known. Five years later, the Nazis assumed power.

The lessons from this historical experience are clear and unambiguous. The defence of wages, social achievements and democratic rights demands a decisive break with the trade unions and their subordination to the government and the state. Childcare workers will inevitably suffer defeat if their struggle remains under the control of ver.di and GEW. They have to organise independently.

Under conditions in which budget cuts are dictated everywhere and the world economy is dominated by an insatiable financial oligarchy, the working class confronts political tasks. A political party is required which rejects the profit logic of capitalism, represents a socialist programme and pursues an international strategy. This party exists: the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG).

We urge all employees in social and childcare services to discuss these questions with us. The building of PSG branches in the workplace is a vital part of the preparation for the class struggles ahead.



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