

German trade union prepares sellout of childcare workers' strike

Our correspondents
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Only 20,000 of a total of 6 million registered trade union members participated in the four rallies called on Saturday in support of workers in social and childcare services by the German confederation of trade unions (DGB), the services trade union Ver.di, and the education and science trade union (GEW). In Cologne, there were 15,000 participants, 3,000 in Hannover, 2,000 in Nuremberg and, according to official statistics, 2,500 in Dresden.

The low level of participation is not difficult to understand. Although there is considerable public sympathy for the childcare workers and their demands, there is no trust in the trade unions. Many workers thus demonstrated their mistrust in the unions with their feet. This was most apparent in Dresden. Although participants were transported by buses from many parts of eastern Germany, only around 600, mainly Ver.di members, gathered—not, as the DGB claimed, 2,500.

The rallies were aimed above all at preparing the final sellout of the strike. The nationwide strike by workers in social and childcare services was halted at the end of May without any results secured, and was sent to arbitration last Wednesday. The childcare and social workers involved are now to be compelled to accept a deal that will fall well short of the 10 percent wage increase they had demanded. The result of the arbitration is expected on June 22.

In Cologne, trade union representatives informed those present on Saturday of the forthcoming sellout. They repeatedly noted that “perhaps this time, no great success” would be achieved. The 10 percent demand was not even mentioned at any of the four rallies.

In each city, the trade unions invited speakers from the government and major parties, the very forces that have been the target of the contract struggle. These parties all sit on the employers' side in the contract talks. In Cologne, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician

Matthias Zimmer spoke, and Social Democratic (SPD) chairman Sigmar Gabriel spoke in Hannover. In Nuremberg, Michael Kellner from the Greens was present, and in Dresden, Katja Kipping from the Left Party.

The main rally was supposed to take place in Hannover. Alongside the chairmen of the DGB, Ver.di and GEW, Gabriel raised the demand that the federal government had to do more to help municipalities suffering crisis situations. “The municipalities should not be confronted with the choice of either improving accommodation for refugees or paying childcare workers more,” he declared.

This sentence could have been spoken by a representative of Pegida or other anti-immigrant party. The chronic financial shortage facing municipalities is not the result of the recent increase in refugees, but of tax cuts for the rich, the debt break and other austerity measures, for which the SPD bears responsibility. As deputy chancellor and economics minister, Gabriel is one of the top representatives of the federal government and is thus responsible for the miserable working conditions in the public sector.

In Nuremberg, Michael Kellner, the Greens' federal whip, made great play of his support for Ver.di's demands. The municipalities required more funds from the federal government and the states, he said, and this would be available if only another tax policy was pursued. He did not mention the fact that the Greens currently sit in eight state governments, supported the Agenda 2010 welfare reforms in the SPD-led government of Gerhard Schröder, and campaigned particularly strongly in favour of the debt break.

The trade unions have constructed an artificial conflict between federal, state and municipal levels of government. In reality, governments at the federal and state level are responsible for the cuts, which are then implemented by their party colleagues in the cities and

municipalities. They have the same interests and organise a division of labour. Gabriel's SPD colleague Thomas Böhle is president of the association of municipal employers' organisations (VKA), which has been firmly rejecting the striking workers' demands for weeks.

The Left Party, represented by Kipping in Dresden, also supports the social attacks. The party was part of the SPD-Left Party administration that governed Berlin for 10 years and organised social cuts, and the Left Party's Bodo Ramelow is currently state premier in Thuringia. The party is presently preparing for participation in government at the federal level. On the same day Kipping spoke on the childcare strike in Dresden, she gave an interview to the *Bild* newspaper in which she supported the demands of leading Left Party member Gregor Gysi: "We can and should also want to govern at the federal level," she said.

At all four rallies, one speaker after the other delivered hollow phrases about reevaluation, decent-paying jobs and a "clear signal to the employers." But not a single one explained why Ver.di called a halt to the strike the day before the beginning of a strike by postal workers, who are also organised in Ver.di. Train drivers, retail workers and teachers are also involved in struggles, as well as workers at Amazon, Siemens, Karstadt and other companies.

But the trade unions carefully maintain the isolation of each strike. The unions want to avoid at all costs the expansion of the strikes into a broad mobilisation against the government, which is spending billions for military equipment, including helicopters, warships, guns, tanks, drones and a new missile defence system. It therefore does not want to make any money available for social services.

This policy is supported by the trade unions. This is why the issues of rearmament and war were not raised at any of the four rallies. The 240,000 workers in social and childcare services are confronted by a conspiracy involving the trade unions, public sector employers and all parties represented in the Bundestag.

In Nuremberg, GEW executive member Norbert Hocke felt compelled to claim that the strike had not been called off, but merely postponed. He was obviously seeking to contain the anger that has broken out among rank-and-file members. Significant sections of members and strikers correctly understand the postponing of the strike as the prelude to a sellout.

This was also shown by the response to the statement "The role of the trade unions in the German childcare

workers' strike", distributed in hundreds of copies at the rallies.

In Nuremberg, Alexandre, from Munich, with a diploma in social pedagogy, commented on the appearance of leading politicians at all four DGB rallies. "Politicians like Sigmar Gabriel and Gregor Gysi sometimes speak about social inequality when it serves their needs", he said. "But they are not actually interested in the lives of ordinary people."

He believed that Ver.di had no other option but to maintain some sort of working relationship with them, as this mechanism is demanded by the system of social partnership. However, he thought that "Ver.di is leading us in the wrong direction. Workers cannot realise their interests within this framework."

Alexandre continued, "In Germany a tiny minority has enriched itself incredibly over recent years, at the cost of the general population. Even a portion of their billions would be sufficient, not just to meet the immediate demands of people in this country, but an entire continent like Africa. But instead there are new colonial operations. Millions of people are being forced to work for low wages, and if they lose their job, they fall into the abyss."

In Cologne, Uta, a childcare worker in social services in a deprived area, carried a placard with the slogan, "Only when the last bank has been saved, the last state bankruptcy prevented, the last major airport completed, will you realise that the children were our future."

Uta explained how the demands at her workplace continuously grow, while wages remain low and austerity measures devastate social services. "I hope this is the beginning of a larger strike movement joined by other social professions," she said. Postal workers had also been affected by wage dumping and cuts, she added, so there were good reasons for a joint struggle. "Many achievements go back to major strike movements, such as sick pay, for example. This is the example we have to follow."



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