

# German child care strike delegates rebuff union president

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A conference of child care worker delegates held in Frankfurt erupted in anger Wednesday against efforts by ver.di union officials to push through an arbitrator's decision that abandons demands by 240,000 public sector workers for improved wages and conditions. Around 500 delegates, consisting of regional strike leaders, unanimously rejected the arbitration agreement, with no delegate speaking in favour of it.

Many of the delegates have been long-time union functionaries and expressed concern that they could lose control of rank-and-file workers who have been on strike for a month. Their response was a pale reflection of far deeper sentiments among workers who are hostile to the treachery of ver.di leadership and are determined to fight austerity measures being imposed at every level of the German government.

Ver.di, which has long collaborated with cost-cutting measures imposed by the big business politicians, has spent weeks trying to shut down strikes by postal and other workers in order to prevent a political confrontation with the government.

Delegates at Wednesday's meeting called the proposed settlement "insulting", a "provocation", a "slap in the face" and "completely unacceptable." One delegate after another stood up to report on the anger and outrage "at grassroots level."

Ver.di president Frank Bsirske, for his part, responded angrily and attacked the strike delegates. He first attempted to spin the arbitration results, saying it included an average wage increase of 3.3 percent over five years, which, he said, was a third of the union's original demands. He then admitted this amounted to a pay freeze for social workers but went on to justify this by saying workers "had already been upgraded in 2009".

Bsirske then got to down to threats, saying whoever

rejected the proposal had to be aware of the dire consequences. The municipal employers, he said, could wait out a strike and would not be hurt financially. On the contrary, Bsirske said, echoing the day care managers and the government, "The employers had made huge profits due to parent contributions that were not repaid. That amounts to 45 million euros so far." The conflict would only get more difficult, Bsirske warned.

If the offer were defeated, the union bureaucrat continued, workers would end up with even less. If workers intensified their struggle, he continued, they would only leave a "scorched earth" behind them. To make matters worse, Bsirske moaned on, whoever wanted to keep fighting had to be prepared to accept "shattered relationships" with parents, employers, etc.

Hoping that he had sufficiently demoralised the audience, the ver.di president posed the rhetorical question, "Should we really carry the strike forward?" only to be met with a resounding "Yes!" from the delegates.

The proposal, which was first made known on Tuesday, has the character of a binding contract. After four weeks on strike, social service and child care workers are being told to accept a raise of about €50 a month for several pay brackets until June 30, 2020. Many social workers will come away with even less. The five-year contract also includes a ban on strikes.

The agreement would apply not only to public sector employees but also to the wages and salaries of more than half-a-million other employees in independent and church-based organisations.

"We didn't go on strike for that," was the unanimous opinion of the delegates.

"Many social workers have gone on strike with us who now go away empty handed. Our young child care

workers say: Then we would rather have nothing at all. What are we supposed to do with a lousy 1 or 2 percent?” shouted an angry delegate from Hannover.

Martin from Stuttgart asked, “Was this agreement arrived at under torture? Yesterday in Stuttgart, we had a meeting, and the 180 people who came all had the same reaction, ‘This is not an agreement, this is an insult.’ With this strike, we want the child care profession to be raised to the equivalent level of a bachelor’s degree. But now, social workers get absolutely nothing. Our vote is clear: Rejection.”

“In our case, a special education teacher now gets 5.75 euros more in the pay packet. After four weeks of striking, that is laughable,” said a delegate from Northwest Brandenburg. “We didn’t take to the streets for that.”

A delegate from Munich reported, “There’s only one reaction from us: We are stunned. We reject this agreement unanimously. This is in no way what we went on strike for. This is not an improvement—it’s patchwork. The social workers were on strike with us in Munich in large numbers. With this proposal, almost all of our young colleagues get next to nothing.”

Most delegates came from regions where local strike meetings had already registered their opposition on Tuesday evening. A delegate from the Wester district said, “I bring you a clear vote from more than 300 members. We reject this proposal in its entirety. The majority of people who have been out in the streets are now being penalised. You can’t continue feeding us such humiliations forever.”

A delegate from Cologne said she spoke for 2,000 strikers. “I am bringing you a complete rejection. The strike should be resumed as soon as possible.”

“For us, the strike was a path to the future,” said a delegate from the Ruhr area. “More and more colleagues joined us and all day cares were closed. You have told us, Captain Bsirske, that this is a historic strike for improvement in careers for women. This agreement is a mockery. It divides the workforce. We are ready, as before, for the original demand to carry the strike forward,” she added. “Look at what’s happening in Germany: The postal workers and the workers at the Charité Hospital in Berlin are on strike.”

Other delegates also referred to the other strikes currently taking place. One said, “Do you actually know what’s going on at the Charité? If we stop now,

we’ll be stabbing them in the back.” Beatrix from Saxony-Anhalt asked, “Why don’t we bring together all the forces in the social, medical and caregiving services?”

Many delegates warned they could lose control of rank-and-file workers. “You are presenting us with a losing proposition,” said one. “Every one of us here knows what this means for ver.di”. Another said, “You can feel the tension in the air, Frank. How could you publish such statements and make such evaluations without first speaking with us?”

Stefan from Munich reported that he had been present when ver.di sold out a struggle in 2009. “At that time we agreed under pressure because some young colleagues would get something out of it. This time,” he continued, “social workers get next to nothing. That can only lead to upheavals within ver.di itself.”

An intense debate lasted several hours. The ver.di leadership twice had to postpone an announced press conference. In the late afternoon, the union executive board issued a press release stating that the conference of strike delegates had rejected the arbitration proposal.

The present situation confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* two weeks ago about the role of ver.di, the Education and Science Workers Union (GEW) and the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB).

We wrote: “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 Verdi and GEW. They have to organise independently.”



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