

German union manipulates balloting in child care worker strike

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It is vacation time in Germany. The children at 14 out of 16 states in Germany are on break. Next week, the first week of August, all schools and child care centres in Germany will be closed. It is during this week, of all times, that the public service union Ver.di plans to carry out the final phase of its consultations with its members over the resolution of the child care worker strike.

The union has thereby made absolutely clear that it intends to push through the agreement it proposed on July 22 at all costs in order to end the workers' strike. It wants to keep the participation in the vote as small as possible in order to exclude the possibility that workers reject it.

According to union rules, in order for the agreement to be rejected, three quarters of all members would have to vote no. For it to be accepted, on the other hand, a 25 percent in favour would suffice, and abstentions would be counted as agreement.

This delaying tactic reveals how much the union leadership fears that its rotten compromise could be rejected in spite of all its manoeuvres. The Verdi leadership has every reason to fear failure. Opposition to the agreement of June 24 is widespread.

The suggestion of the arbitrators, to raise wages between zero and 4.5 percent, actually amounts to a wage decrease in real terms over time and makes a mockery of the primary objective of the strike, to improve the status of social and educational workers. In addition, the agreement would forbid employees in the social and education sector from going on strike for another five years, until June 2020.

For the lower wage groups, the agreement means a meagre €50 more per month. Social workers and teachers will, for the most part, come out of the strike empty-handed. For many part-time workers, the agreement provides no new improvement of conditions at all, but ties their hands for five years. The result applies not only to public service workers, but also indirectly to workers at

more than a half a million religious-based organisations.

"That is not why we went on strike," said one of the affected workers in a posting on a member forum.

A resolution rejecting the contract circulated on the Internet already bears the signatures of more than 500 union members. It says, "The demand for the agreement to be accepted insults us, it makes us furious. Is this what public appreciation looks like?... We call on Verdi members to reject the agreement!"

Another comment on the member forum expresses the disappointment felt by many workers over the entire union strategy: "The desire to change the social meaning of the social sector with whistling, homemade posters and infantile information campaigns simply brings tears to the eyes. How will things continue with Frank [Bsirske] and his Berlin clique? How can you prevent them from slipping out unnoticed out the back door?" The entire campaign, they argued, had been completely "sabotaged."

There is also deep and widespread resentment about the latest delaying tactic. A member named Norbert describes the chaotic circumstances that prevail and voiced his mistrust in the Ver.di leadership:

"Call at the district, go to the business office. Check whether everyone affected is actually called up (by name!!), that is, found. Call coworkers in the affected institutions and ask.... Was anyone with an election box there? Were all those affected reached? When is one finally coming? Was a ballot (poster and flier are not allowed) called up according to the rules?... Organise the vote! The vote should have been going on for a week already!"

A member in Bremen wrote: "On Thursday, the 23 of July, Verdi Bremen has now 'definitively' communicated to us how the vote is supposed to go. It is all happening as we feared. The vote takes place not only during summer vacation, no, also when many of the buildings are closed! We are supposed show up at the German Confederation of

Trade Unions (DGB) building in Bremen next week (starting July 27) and vote there. Super, our building will be closed then and pretty much no one will make his way over to the DGB building.... The result of the vote is already clear to me now.”

One blogger said on July 24: “All members in Hamburg have been excluded from the vote on the grounds that they only voted for the strike out of solidarity with their colleagues in other regions.... The result of the arbitration is an insult to the employees and further from a rise in status than the earth is from the sun.”

The social workers, who will receive nothing at all, as well as the specialists who work with the disabled, are especially disappointed and angry. The professional association of disability specialists has issued a statement calling for the rejection of the agreement in which it describes how the struggle for a better assessment of the profession has been undermined for 25 years.

At the end of April, more than 90 percent of the members of Ver.di, GEW and BDD (Beamtenbund) voted to strike in order to fight for the long-overdue recognition of their demanding work with children, the disabled, the socially disadvantaged and also with refugees. The aim was a fundamental shift that was to be reflected in a wage increase of at least 10 percent.

On July 8, the head of Ver.di in the state of Baden-Württemberg admitted to the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that the strike had a lot of support in the population: “There is scarcely a single person in the republic who does not think our demands are justified. Society is actually with us.”

In fact, the very success of the strike was—for the union leadership—an important reason for breaking it off as soon as possible. It raised the danger that—together with other strikes of postal workers, Charité hospital employees, train drivers, employees at the Karstadt and Kaufhof shopping centres and many others—it would develop into a broad social movement against the government and austerity policies in Europe. For this reason, the decision was made to end the strike and begin arbitration.

After the unexpected initiation of arbitration, the DGB organised a nationwide demonstration on June 13. The unions used this demonstration as a platform to send a signal to the municipal employers that they were ready to sell out the strike. They invited leading politicians who had carried out cuts on the state and municipal level to speak. Federal Economic Minister Sigmar Gabriel spoke beside representatives of the Christian Democratic Union, the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left

Party.

Ver.di chief negotiator Achim Meerkamp announced at the demonstration on June 13 that there were indications “that we cannot manage a complete landslide.” Actually, by this time Ver.di had long ago decided on a complete sellout. The union had planned from the very beginning to carry on the strike until summer vacation 2015 at the very longest. This was made clear by an internal PowerPoint presentation at the end of December 2014.

When a strike delegate conference rejected the agreement in Frankfurt on June 24, Ver.di head Frank Bsirske reacted by threatening that a continuation of the strike would lead to its defeat. Whoever rejects it now, he said, would lose in the end and leave behind “scorched earth” and “destroyed relations.” “We can of course reject it,” said Bsirske. “But that is just what the municipal employers are waiting for.”

Since then, the postal service strike, the strike at the Charité hospital and the train workers’ strike were all ended without having achieved their aims. In the case of the postal service, the corporate bargaining committee agreed to a result that codifies the existence of 49 cheap labour firms of Delivery GmbH belonging to the postal service, without any consultation or vote of the membership.

The end of this struggle bears an obvious similarity to the result of the referendum in Greece on July 5. The working class expresses its will with great clarity, and the union bureaucrats react by doing the exact opposite.

The reason for this is that pseudo-left parties such as Syriza and unions such as Ver.di do not represent the interests of the working class, but the interests of the upper middle class. While Alexis Tsipras carries out the attacks demanded by the European Union against the Greek population, Ver.di head Bsirske is determined to force through the five-year binding contract of the arbitrators against the wishes expressed by the workers.

Workers must draw definite conclusions from this experience. In order to carry out a successful struggle, they must break with the unions, organise independently of them, base themselves on the power of the international working class and take up the struggle for a socialist programme.



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