

Germany: No confidence vote against Ver.di union in day care dispute

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In the contract dispute involving day care and social workers, trade union members have rejected the arbitration decision of June 22 by an overwhelming majority. Among Ver.di members, over 69 percent voted “no”, as well as 68.8 percent of members of the GEW (Education and Science) union and over 60 percent from the DBB (Civil and Public Servants Association).

The membership thus decisively opposed the vote by the trade union leadership, which was determined from the outset to wind up the strike before autumn. They have collaborated closely with the public sector employers, and accepted the government’s premise that the working population had to bear the brunt of the economic crisis.

A conference of strike delegates last Saturday in Fulda showed once again the anger building up among the rank and file. “There is anger and frustration and utter incomprehension of how after such a workers’ struggle this type of result can emerge from arbitration,” a participant at the conference said, according to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Another told the news channel Phoenix, “The figures being put about by the media do not correspond at all to what day care workers will get. It is simply too little.”

The participants at the strike delegate conference indicated that the reality was that over 80 percent voted against the result. There has in fact been considerable criticism of the way in which the original strike vote was carried out.

First, the vote was delayed well into the summer holiday period. Then it became apparent that not all service areas had been reached, with a section of the membership only being contacted by email to be told to report to a Ver.di office. In addition, the votes of those members prevented from casting a ballot were possibly counted as abstentions, thus distorting the result. It can therefore be assumed that the rate of opposition was well above 75 percent.

The arbitration decision—rejected so decisively by the union membership—amounts to an ultimatum. The ruling would have obliged day care workers to give up all attempts to fight for a higher pay grade for their jobs for five years, until June 2020. According to the decision, the workers

would have received between 0 percent and 4.5 percent more pay, which equates to a real pay cut.

Most day care workers would receive merely €30 more, and social workers and schoolteachers would get absolutely nothing. This outcome would have a direct and indirect effect on the wages of over 500,000 workers, in both the public sector, and at charities and church-run institutions.

On Tuesday, Ver.di’s commission on federal contracts declared that the arbitration had failed, but adopted no concrete measures for further action. On Thursday, new talks took place with the employers. Ver.di head Frank Bsirske declared that after the summer break he would “identify unconventional strike forms which we will confirm with the strikers.”

The GEW made clear on Saturday that it did not intend to have another strike and wanted to dismiss the vote result purely on bureaucratic grounds. “The quorum demanded by the statute for a strike vote—at least 75 percent must vote for a strike—was missed by a long way,” the GEW web site stated. Alongside this, the proposal to fight for a day care quality law was raised. This aims to promote illusions in parliament so as to avoid launching another strike.

The employers responded angrily to the rejection of the arbitration decision. Thomas Böhle, lead negotiator for the VKA (Association of Municipal Employers’ Organisations), told the *Passauer Neue Presse*, “I see no room for movement upwards ... the budgetary position is bad.”

Böhle is a Social Democrat and embodies more than anyone else the arrogance and aggressiveness of the layer of municipal leaders. When he took over the leadership of the municipal employers’ organisations more than 10 years ago, *Die Welt* wrote of him, “The human resources head of the city of Munich works, or more accurately resides, in a huge room with windows on the third floor of Munich’s city hall, furnished with rugs, a light-coloured carpeted floor and exquisite modern art.”

Böhle’s main argument is that the financial position is bad, and there is no money for social services. This raises the question of who has plundered the public finances and

what the money has been used for. In recent weeks alone, while the union members were voting, the German government decided to spend an additional €8 billion on military rearmament. Virtually limitless resources are available for the modernisation of the army and security agencies.

Bsirske has connections at the highest political level and supports such policies. In June, he helped draft the arbitration decision and signed it. Now he has been confronted with significant opposition among the membership and feels compelled to eat his words.

He said at a press conference on Monday that the result produced an “unprecedented decisive majority” for rejection. At the meetings with strike delegates, “extremely lively discussions” were held. “I don’t know of any case in the past 50 years of a comparable rejection on the part of the members,” said Bsirske. He took the vote “seriously as a call to action” and recommended “to declare the arbitration a failure.”

Bsirske’s tactical retreat is aimed solely at buying time so as to suppress the opposition in his own ranks. It was Bsirske who, at the strike delegates’ meeting in Frankfurt on June 24, threatened the delegates that whoever continued the strike would lose everything and leave behind “scorched earth” and “disrupted relations.” Bsirske welcomed the miserable arbitration ruling, describing it as “a step in the right direction.”

At Monday’s press conference, Bsirske confirmed once again that the union voluntarily agreed to arbitration in June and called off the strike. He said, “Faced with the alternative of a continuation of the strike, arbitration was jointly [with the employers’ side] agreed ... this led to a recommendation, approved by both arbitrators ... we viewed the outcome as a step in the right direction.”

Bsirske pointed to the main goal of the employers’ side as well as the trade unions. He said that the stance of the employers was “essentially characterised by the fear that it could spread to other professions, such as health care or elderly care, other social professions that have also traditionally had wage discrimination. In my opinion, that is the central reason for their uncompromising stance.”

Ver.di voluntarily agreed to arbitration in early June, and thus to “industrial peace” at the very point when it was becoming clear that the strike was winning growing support among the population, and as postal workers and health care workers at Berlin’s Charité hospital went on strike.

The trade union leadership’s main concern was to maintain control over the strike and to secure the position of the Merkel government, municipal employers and big capital. Not only did they confront opposition from a significant section of the public sector, but also the Greek

population, which clearly spoke out against Economics Minister Wolfgang Schäuble’s diktat from the European Union in the July 5 referendum.

Day care workers and social workers have reached a decisive crossroads. They can only seriously carry forward the struggle for wages and working conditions if they make the vote against the arbitration ruling the starting point for a rebellion to break out of the control of Ver.di and take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands.

Trade union leaders like Bsirske stand on the opposing side. The elite officials of the DGB (German Trade Union Confederation) are part of a privileged social layer and represent entirely different interests than the teachers, day care workers and social workers. Frank Bsirske, for example, has an annual salary of significantly more than €500,000, chiefly drawn from several posts on company supervisory boards. He sits (or sat) on the boards of Deutsche Bank, Postbank, IBM, Lufthansa and RWE and on the administrative board of the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) bank.

The parties of the trade union leaders—the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Left Party—are jointly responsible with the Christian Democrats for the chronic underfunding of municipalities. For years, they have supported tax cuts for the wealthy, the imposition of a debt ceiling limiting public spending, and the redirection of public funds to preparation for war.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) have repeatedly explained, the workers engaged in strikes over recent weeks and months—day care workers, train drivers, postal workers and health care workers—confront political tasks. It is necessary to break with the restricted, nationalist conceptions of the trade unions and organise a joint struggle of all workers in the factories and public services, including workers in other countries confronting the same problems. This requires an internationalist and socialist perspective and the building of a new, revolutionary party.



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