

German Left Party leader backs sellout by Ver.di trade union

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In a slap to the face for the Ver.di service sector union and its leader Frank Bsirske, nursery workers rejected the arbitration ruling which would have ended their strike.

In order to achieve the result it wanted, the union had worked on its members for weeks, intimidating and trying to trick them. The ballot was moved into the main holiday season to keep participation as low as possible. Nevertheless, approximately 70 percent of those who voted rejected the arbitration proposal, which would have meant complete surrender after weeks of strike.

This rebellion against the trade union leadership sent shock waves not only through Ver.di headquarters, but also a few kilometres away in Karl Liebknecht House, the main base of the Left Party. Left Party chairman Bernd Riexinger personally spoke out to help Bsirske bring the situation back under control.

On August 13, Riexinger published a long article in *Junge Welt*, in which he offered Ver.di all his party's expertise in order to damp down the anger of the employees in Social and Educational Services (SuE) and ensure it came to nothing.

Riexinger did this not only as a close personal acquaintance of Bsirske, but also because he was Ver.di's district secretary in Stuttgart before moving to the top of the Left Party in 2012. No other party is as specialised as the Left Party in enforcing the most right-wing policies under the cover of left-wing phrases. It is not by chance that it is the sister party of Syriza in Greece, which promised an end to austerity and then swung into government to impose tougher austerity measures than any of its predecessors.

In particular, pseudo-left groups within the Left Party—Marx21 (allied to Britain's Socialist Workers Party), Socialist Alternative (SAV, allied to Britain's Socialist Party), etc.—are extremely active in Ver.di and have a lot of experience in leading members around by the nose in order to demoralise and wear them down.

Riexinger knows that selling out a union can no longer be done in the clumsy way Monika Wulf-Mathies used to operate. Following a major strike involving 330,000 workers in 1992, Wulf-Mathies, then chair of the Public Services and Transport Union (ÖTV)—Ver.di's predecessor—simply ignored the result of the ballot and signed a collective agreement against the will of the union members. If Bsirske tried the same thing today, all the waste paper baskets in the Ver.di headquarters would not be enough to hold the returned membership cards.

Riexinger has therefore submitted a comprehensive plan on how to give the impression of leading a struggle without really mounting one. His proposal boils down to turning the labour dispute into symbolic gesturing, and the exercise of economic pressure into moral persuasion.

Anyone who has had just a little industrial experience knows that such tactics wear down not the opposition, but one's own forces. And this is precisely Riexinger's aim. When the IG Metall engineering union carried black coffins through the towns of the Ruhr area to protest against the closure of steel plants and coal mines in the 1970s and 1980s, instead of

fighting against this, it was known that the shut-downs had long been accepted by the trade unions.

“Unconventional action”

Riexinger initially referred to the rejection of the arbitration result as a “bombshell”, and then placed himself firmly behind Ver.di boss Bsirske, at whom the bomb was aimed. “Ver.di chairman Frank Bsirske rightly speaks of a ‘unique’ occurrence in trade union history and of our colleagues ‘clear signal’ to their union,” he writes, adding that it is therefore “logical to assume that Ver.di will now make moves to continue the strike.”

In reality, Ver.di will do no such thing. It is, like all other unions, bound to the employers through the policy of “social partnership”. It sees its task as suppressing the class struggle, not promoting it.

This collaboration is particularly intense in the public sector, because union officials belong to the same parties that govern the municipalities and federal states, and often move from one side of the negotiating table to the other. Bsirske himself, a member of the Greens, was head of the city of Hanover personnel department for 13 years, where he cut almost a thousand jobs before moving to take on the union leadership.

The same applies to the Left Party, which holds seats in numerous eastern German municipalities and in two state governments.

It is impossible to defend wages, jobs and social gains, let alone improve them, without breaking with the corrupt trade union apparatus and organising independently of it. This is exactly what Riexinger wants to prevent.

First, he calls for a new strike strategy. After Ver.di—many of whose functionaries are themselves members of the Left Party—has isolated the nursery workers' strike and kept it on the back burner, Riexinger now declares that full-scale economic strikes are a thing of the past and have to be replaced by symbolic strikes and pseudo-protests.

He writes, “The dispute can therefore only be won if—as Frank Bsirske announced—‘unconventional actions’ are taken that are difficult for the other side to deal with.”

In the next sentence, he then explains what these “unconventional actions” should be: “Always take action in waves to avoid expending (the union's) strength too quickly” and “make visits to mayors, town council meetings and local Social Democratic Party (SPD) deputies,” etc.

In other words, the fight against wretched working conditions and low wages should be replaced by pseudo-protests, symbolic gestures and fruitless commotion directed at the very parties that are responsible for these abuses in the first case. The SPD, Greens and Left Party support all the so-called debt ceilings that force municipalities to make ever deeper social cuts.

Riexinger justifies this avoidance of a serious struggle with the claim that the economic and financial pressure on the local authority employers remained very low during the nursery workers' strike because they did not have to pay them their wages and the day care fees continued to be paid by many parents.

This assertion is incorrect in several respects. First, the strike certainly succeeded in exerting tremendous economic pressure, compelling many parents to look after their children themselves and with industry, commerce and state administrations suddenly confronted with an absence of their workforce. That is why many employers' organisations were already urging a speedy end to the strike after its first week. Ver.di then agreed to arbitration.

Secondly, Ver.di limited the strike to pinprick provocations from the outset. Only about 40,000 of the approximately 240,000 employees in social and educational services were called on to strike because the union wanted to restrict the economic impact as much as possible.

Thirdly, the Ver.di leadership did everything possible to prevent the nursery workers' strike combining with other labour disputes by postal workers, Telekom and Postbank employees, train drivers, airport staff, teachers, nurses, Karstadt and Amazon workers and many other occupational groups all taking place at the same time. Ver.di wanted, at all costs, to prevent these conflicts developing into a broad strike movement against the government.

Strikes by postal and hospital workers

Riexinger also sought to justify Ver.di's betrayal of the postal workers' strike. He admitted that a 60-percent-plus approval rating for postal workers after four weeks of the strike was very high, and that the effects of the strike were certainly felt: "300 million letters and two million parcels were lying unattended." Nevertheless, Ver.di had "terminated [the strike] after six unsuccessful rounds of negotiations because it was afraid of exhausting [the union's] capacity for mobilisation," according to Riexinger.

The claim that Ver.di ended an unsuccessful postal strike because its members lacked sufficient will to fight is a bare-faced lie. The first major strike in the postal service for more than two decades was met with tremendous support by workers. But from the very beginning, Ver.di limited the strike to a few key locations and was unprepared to mobilise the full potential of the 140,000-strong workforce.

Ver.di signalled its willingness to compromise in seven rounds of negotiations, thus strengthening management's hand in its aggressive actions. An escalation of the strike was demanded at numerous strike meetings but Ver.di refused to expand the struggle, even when civil servants were illegally employed as scab labour.

Riexinger was shamelessly enthusiastic about the strike at the Berlin Charité University Hospital. He wrote that the employees there had been involved in the collective bargaining from the outset and were able to "have their say over the entire course of the work stoppages."

He added that this had significantly strengthened the trade unionists "resolve in the dispute" and therefore "a lot (could) be learned from the experience of workers at the Berlin Charité." Concluding, he gushed that nurses and caretakers at the Charité "have already made hospital and union history with the first strike in the cause of more staff and less stress in the hospital."

Assaulted by such simulated adulation, one would be tempted to cry out to Riexinger: Lie if you must, but don't lay it on quite so thick!

Nothing that he writes is true. No specific improvements at all have been achieved at the Charité, it is all just declarations of intent and hot air. Ver.di reached an accord with the hospital management in a "benchmark paper," which is to form the basis for a future collective agreement titled "Health and Demography." Details of the agreement are little known and, instead, only a few vague declarations of intent are available.

According to a Ver.di press release, both sides have agreed to "establish regulations to reduce the workload in all areas of work." In reality, it was only agreed to cooperate more closely in the future.

Given the far-reaching privatisation plans currently being pursued by Europe's largest hospital, this amounts to a veritable conspiracy on the part of the Charité management, the federal government and union against

the employees and the population. The leading role in this manoeuvre is played by the Left Party and its pseudo-left support group, SAV, whose members have headed the Charité staff council for many years.

Political strike

The final section of Riexinger's article is titled, "The strike has to be political." A political strike is commonly understood to mean a strike against the government and that this involves confronting the question of power. This is not so in Riexinger's view. He is concerned about exercising "political pressure on the grand coalition" government, so that it will be prepared to reform a few laws and cooperate more closely with the trade unions.

He seriously claims that the grand coalition, which has just imposed brutal austerity measures on Greece, can be led by "political pressure"—meaning toothless protests organised by Ver.di and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB)—to implement policies in the interests of workers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) have always stressed, blue and white collar workers engaged in the strikes of the past weeks and months—social and educational services employees, train drivers, postal and Charité staff—have certainly been confronted with political tasks. But these tasks do not consist of merely putting pressure on the government.

Given the international crisis of the capitalist system, no ruling class anywhere in the world is willing any longer to grant concessions to its workforce. The working class must prepare for a struggle for the conquest of political power. Every wage struggle must be aimed at strengthening the working class around the world and preparing an international revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism and establish workers' governments.

The trade unions respond to the profound crisis of the capitalist system by collaborating ever more closely with the government. They therefore isolate each wage dispute, limit it to the smallest possible number of strikers and sell them out.

It is necessary to break with the limited, nationalist perspectives of the trade unions and organise a joint struggle of all workers in all factories and offices—a struggle that would also include the workers of other countries who confront the same problems. This requires an international socialist perspective and the building of the only revolutionary workers' party, the PSG.



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