

# Unions renew attempt to sell out German childcare workers

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The Ver.di, GEW (Education and Science Workers' Union) and DBB (German Civil Service Federation) trade unions reached an agreement with the municipal employers' association (VKA) on the childcare workers' collective agreement dispute in Hannover last Wednesday. They agreed to virtually the same sell-out deal for 240,000 childcare workers, social workers, disability support workers and carers as the June 22 arbitration decision.

The members of all three trade unions had rejected this deal by an overwhelming majority. Despite this, the latest result of negotiations is virtually indistinguishable from the June offer. With a five-year no-strike agreement, it commits employees to abandon any further struggle to have their jobs classified higher on the pay scale until June 2020.

The total cost of the deal is essentially the same. According to VKA sources, it amounts to €315 million, a less than €9 million increase in the wage bill. The increases for each group range between 1 and 4.5 percent—miles away from the stated goal of a 10 percent raise.

The arbitrator's decision from June mainly benefited older workers, but not those at lower and mid-levels. At the time, the trade union leaders, along with the municipal employers' association, hoped to entice the striking workers, many of them older employees, with the offer. This calculation was misguided, and at strike delegate conferences there was a rebellion against the trade union leaders, with 70 percent opposing the arbitrator's ruling.

The negotiating partners are now taking the opposite approach: For roughly the same overall cost, the current agreement offers more to lower paid workers at the expense of more senior employees. As VKA President Thomas Böhle stated on Wednesday, "changes [were]

undertaken essentially by reorganisation within the remuneration groups."

But even for lower paid workers, the result is a slap in the face and in no sense the "breakthrough" described by the media. The increases for most childcare and social worker classifications range from €30 to €150 monthly.

The entire agreement is derisory for long-serving members, who responded to the dissatisfaction of the childcare workers and pushed the pay struggle forward. They were already warned by Ver.di head Frank Bsirske at a strike delegates' conference June 24 that whoever rejected the arbitrator's decision would "lose everything in the end" and leave behind "scorched earth" and "disrupted relations".

The trade union leadership is determined to consolidate its control and to prevent any further escalation of the bargaining dispute. In early summer, when train drivers, postal workers, Karstadt and Kaufhof retail workers, and hospital workers at Berlin Charité were on strike, the union bureaucrats detected the threat of a broader strike movement. Ever since, they have done all they can to avoid this at any price.

At Ver.di's federal delegates' conference last week a signal was sent with the re-election of Bsirske to chairman with 88 percent of the vote. The conference was a rally calling for closer collaboration between the Merkel government, capital and public sector employers.

The delegates greeted the Christian Democratic Union Chancellor Angela Merkel with polite applause, even though she has been pursuing a course of social cuts and militarism for years, and organised the looting of Greece.

Bsirske made clear to the employers' side at the conference that they had nothing to fear in the childcare

workers' strike. He informed his listeners that it was "clear to all" that a "wage disparity growing for decades [cannot be] overcome in one go." The delegates greeted him with standing ovations, thereby making clear that the entire trade union backs his course and does not represent workers' interests.

The childcare contract dispute won significant support six months ago precisely because it marked a genuine shift, and because it was linked to the "reclassification" of social service workers. Well over 90 percent of Ver.di, GEW and DBB members voted for a strike to achieve the long sought-after recognition for their demanding work with children, people with disabilities, refugees, and socially excluded people. Their action enjoyed considerable popular support.

It was this very success that prompted the trade unions to suddenly break off the strike and enter arbitration without any preconditions. Since then, other strikes—in the postal service, at the Charité hospital and the railways—have been brought to a halt without reaching their goals.

"To be mistreated by your own people like that really hurts," a Ver.di member wrote on an internal forum. Another came to the conclusion, "If one carefully considers the choreography of the past few months again," then the "course of this 'workers' struggle' [was] planned to turn out this way." Another wrote, "The total cost remains the same. So many good people left out. The unwanted goods from the arbitration ruling have been newly packaged to try and sell them to us a second time."

By contrast, government representatives and the press are full of praise for the result, hailing it as an important "breakthrough in the childcare dispute." "Parents can breathe again," *Focus* wrote, and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described the outcome as "A bonus for all sides." Federal Minister for Family Affairs Manuela Schwesig (Social Democratic Party) welcomed the agreement, saying she was happy "that further strikes were avoided."

Ver.di's negotiating team expressed unanimous support for the deal, and the federal collective agreement commission met in Fulda on Friday, after which a vote by the membership will be introduced.

Thus far, all attempts to force through a sell-out contract have been met with bitter opposition from the members. This resistance reflects a deep dissatisfaction

spreading throughout broad sections of workers that finds expression around the world. Autoworkers in the United States are actively resisting the attacks of the automakers and UAW union. It is also emerging in Germany with the deep divide between the willingness to assist refugees on the part of wide sections of the population in contrast to the government's aggressive policy of deterrence.

These are the precursors of major social explosions. To assert itself in these struggles, the working class must build an independent and international movement based on a socialist programme.



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