

German childcare workers' wage dispute: Vote "no"!

The Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The recent agreement in the childcare workers' wage dispute must be firmly rejected. Although an overwhelming majority of members rejected the arbitration proposal of June 2015, the unions are now once again organizing a ballot on a virtually identical contract. Voting will run October 7 to 28.

The new agreement is not only a mockery of the demand for reasonable payment of employees in municipal social and educational services. It also subjects them to a five-year industrial peace obligation, lasting until the end of June 2020. This amounts to a sell-out prescribing low wages for years to come.

In times of rising cost of living, social workers are to be fobbed off with a pittance payment of €30 to €80 a month or nothing at all. Moreover, some 60 percent of the young carers, all of whom were supposed to be receiving something more, will not be getting any increase because they work (often against their will) under part-time contracts.

But a "no" at the ballot paper will not be enough to reject the union's sell-out. It is becoming increasingly clear that workers in the municipal social and educational services are faced with political objectives.

No matter how often they reject the proposals, they won't be able to force the unions to put up a fight. The unions will continue to run ballots on miserable agreements until they wear out those affected. Or they will simply disregard their members' votes, as they have in the past. Doing so is easier for them than resorting to undemocratic trade union rules, which require the approval of only 25 percent of the membership for a contract, while 75 percent is necessary for a strike.

From the outset the Ver.di service industry union, the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW) and the German Civil Service Federation (DBB) had no intention of fighting for better conditions for teachers, social workers, disabled workers and child carers, who are

miserably paid in spite of the ever-increasing demands placed upon them. Although more than 90 percent of the members voted in April to strike and were broadly supported by the general population, the unions put the strike on the back burner and used it to allow workers to let off steam.

They have now called a strike for only about 40,000 of the more than approximately 240,000 employees. From the outset, they excluded non-state and religious institutions from the industrial dispute. When the strike nevertheless gained momentum in May, they also strangled it by submitting to arbitration and thus preventing any solidarity with concurrently striking postal workers, Telekom and Postbank employees, shop assistants, train drivers and staff at the Berlin Charité hospital.

Despite the manoeuvres and tricks of the trade unions, some 70 percent of the members finally rejected the arbitration proposal—only to have practically the same lousy sell-out now shoved under their noses again. As president of the Municipal Employers' Association (VKA) Thomas Böhle (Social Democratic Party, SPD) openly admitted, the only changes were "undertaken mainly by reorganisation within the remuneration groups."

The reason for this sabotage of serious industrial struggle on the part of the trade unions is to be found in their essential character and political perspective. They represent the interests of the employers rather than the employees, and they defend the capitalist profit system, which drives millions of people worldwide into misery and is based on the pillaging of the vast majority by a tiny minority.

This applies not only to Ver.di, the GEW and the DBB, but to all trade unions in Germany and internationally. All of the sackings in the German metal and steel industry bear the signature of IG Metall and its works councils. IG

Metall has organised the shutdown of entire businesses, such as Opel in Bochum. Prior to the recent scandal, the works council at VW had already submitted a savings program of its own, amounting to more than €5 billion.

The trade unions are also enmeshed in a web of relations aimed at integrating them into the management levels of the public service. They move in the same circles, maintain the same lifestyle, enjoy the same privileges and often move from one side of the negotiating table to the other. Ver.di's Frank Bsirske was head of the city of Hanover personnel department for 13 years, where he cut almost 1,000 jobs before moving to take on the union leadership. Thanks to a monthly salary in the tens of thousands and numerous commissions on supervisory boards, the union boss now earns over half a million euros a year.

The problem, however, is not only Bsirske and a number of top officials. The entire trade union apparatus supports them. Before Bsirske agreed to the second sell-out in Hanover, a thousand delegates at the Ver.di federal congress gave him their backing by electing him chairman for another four years with 88.5 percent of their votes. A large majority of the Federal Tariff Commission (BTK) also supported the new collective agreement.

The trade unions are determined to defend the capitalist profit system against any movement from below. Although they were able to link their policy of social partnership with better wages and working conditions in the postwar period, this has become increasingly impossible with the intensification of globalisation since the 1980s. They see their task—as do the business associations and the government—as defending “Standort Deutschland” (Germany as a powerful commercial player) by contributing to the reduction of wages and public expenditure, and complying with the insatiable demands of the financial aristocracy. They have become a kind of industrial police force.

The trade union functionaries are members of the same parties that introduced the so-called debt ceiling and bled the municipalities dry—the SPD, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union alliance (CDU/CSU), the Greens and the Left Party. They are members of the same parties that are responsible for Agenda 2010, which “rescued” criminal banks with hundreds of billions of euros, have imposed devastating austerity measures on Greece, and also work to ensure that Germany again plays a leading role in world politics, including a major military role.

They tell employees in municipal social and educational

services that there is no money available. In fact, the employees are the ones who are supposed to foot the bill for the criminal activities of the banks, the enrichment of the financial elite and the return of German militarism.

This demagoguery has now reached its peak, with increased costs for the accommodation of refugees also being cited as a reason for the disgraceful agreement. This is an attempt to exploit the weakest section of society as a scapegoat. The asylum seekers currently pouring into Germany are victims of wars that the US, NATO and the German federal government have been systematically stoking and waging for years.

These same refugees are also exploited to spend billions on upgrading the German military forces in the name of “fighting the causes of refugee flight”—on new armoured tanks, a new missile system, a new warship, helicopters, combat drones and submarines.

The employees in the municipal, social and educational services can only defend their rights and wages if they break with the unions and establish independent action committees. Rejection of the new agreement must be made the starting point for this task.

This requires a new political perspective and the building of a party that represents the interests of working people. Given the deep crisis of world capitalism, which is causing war, social inequality and untold misery throughout the world, this can only be a socialist party which stands for the re-organisation of society in accordance with existing human needs, rather than the claims of capitalist accumulation. It must be a party that is dedicated to the unification of the international working class, that stands in the tradition of the socialist workers' movement and has learned the lessons of the degeneration of social democracy and Stalinism.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG) are working towards this goal. We invite employees in the social and educational professions to contact the SEP to discuss how to continue this struggle.



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