

German public sector union holds “warning strikes”

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29 April 2016

Facing growing anger from public sector workers the Verdi trade union organized selective “warning strikes” across Germany this week. The walkouts involved bus and tram drivers, nurses, childcare workers, street cleaners, airport employees and municipal administrative workers.

The dissatisfaction is not only directed against the employers, but increasingly the union itself, which is negotiating the contract for public services (TVÖ) with representatives of the federal and municipal authorities. Verdi officials are posturing as militant foes of austerity and are demanding a 6 percent wage increase. This is simply an effort, however, to divert attention from the fact that the union has collaborated in the imposition of deregulation, job cuts and wage reductions for years.

The municipal employers and government representatives have made clear that, in spite of billions in budgetary surpluses for this year, they intend to impose a cut in real wages. This is the meaning of the insulting 0.6 percent raise officials have offered for 2016.

Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière and Thomas Böhle, president of the association of municipal employers (VKA), made the offer during the second round of bargaining in Potsdam in mid-April, even though the government had a record surplus for public spending of almost €30 billion in 2015.

In the third round of talks, which began Thursday, not only wages, but also public sector pensions were discussed. The employers’ side intends to push for workers to make larger pension contributions from their pay. Böhle and de Maizière are confident that Verdi will accept this because the union agreed to the same provision in the contract for state employees (TVL) last year.

Verdi has essentially agreed to increased pension contributions from municipal employee as long as union functionaries are consulted. In a post on its web site, the union writes, “We are only prepared to accept higher employee contributions if the necessity to take action is proven for each pension fund.” A leading Verdi executive, Wolfgang Pieper, said in an interview, “We are ready to discuss the situation of each pension fund with the employer if there is a need to take action and if that is proven.”

Verdi has already agreed to a gradual change of the pension system at Frankfurt airport. At the end of November 2015, it accepted a new contract for ground staff through which the fixed pension will be replaced by one made up of investments on the capital markets funded by the employees themselves.

The public sector has been subject to restructuring for many years, and workers have confronted real wage cuts, layoffs and increased stress on the job. Twenty years ago, the federal employees’ contract (BAT) covered 5.2 million workers. It was replaced in 2006 with the TVÖ and TVL. Today, the TVÖ applies to 2.2 million and the TVL to 800,000, amounting together to just 3 million workers.

Even when one takes account of the fact that the state of Hesse—with around 100,000 employees—left the contract alliance, the numbers clearly show how many workers have been axed. On average, 100,000 jobs have been lost each year for the past 20 years, while the demand for qualified staff in the education sector, urban infrastructure, public transport, nursing and childcare has steadily increased.

New hires are increasingly receiving fixed-term contracts. In the past, someone who worked in the public sector had a job for life. But deregulation and the trend towards outsourcing and privatization have resulted in only one in three new hires receiving a permanent post.

Pieper acknowledged this in the previously mentioned interview when he said, “Fixed-term contracts play a large role in the public sector,” adding, “60 percent of new hires are fixed-term.”

Due to the so-called debt brake—which mandates spending cuts when the debt-to GDP ratio rises above 60 percent—and Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble’s “balanced budget” dictate, staff cuts and privatization have been accelerated. Routes on public transport networks have been handed to private bus companies and hospitals have been merged into larger associations and privatized. In every case, washing, catering, cleaning and other services have been outsourced to sub-contractors.

The latest example is provided by Rhineland-Palatinate, where the new coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and neo-liberal Free Democrats have agreed to eliminate a further 2,000 jobs. Similar cost-cutting measures at the expense of public

sector workers are being planned and implemented by all levels of government.

None of these problems are being raised as issues in the contract talks.

The negotiations are in reality a done deal, since the Verdi representatives have more in common with the employers than with the workers they allegedly represent. They belong to the same political parties, and see the same need to offload the cost for the crisis on the backs of the workers and they frequently switch places from top union posts into senior offices in the government.

The best example is Frank Bsirske, the Verdi leader. He is a member of the same trade union as Thomas Böhle from the employers' side. Böhle is also a member of both Verdi and the SPD.

Bsirske is the longest-serving chair of a German trade union. At the same time, he sits on a number of supervisory boards, including Deutsche Bank, Postbank and IBM. He is deputy chairman of the board at energy firm RWE, and a member of the administrative council at the reconstruction loan corporation (KfW).

Before becoming union chair in 2000, Bsirske participated in a modernization program as human resources head in the city of Hanover, during which time 1,000 of 16,000 jobs were cut. Bsirske's role became clear last year during the childcare workers' strike, when he strangled the struggle of carers, social workers and disability support workers, forcing them to accept the same terms they had previously rejected decisively.

Those workers who have gone through so many terrible experiences with the trade unions over the years are watching the talks with extreme mistrust.

Martin, a nurse from Frankfurt, wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "In the public sector collective bargaining poker, unfortunately only a percentage wage increase is being considered which will certainly leave the lower earners further away from those on high incomes ... although staff cuts and deteriorating working conditions are briefly pointed out, Verdi ultimately accepts them as unavoidable."

Martin works at Höchst hospital, which is being merged with facilities in Hofheim and Bad Soden to form one of the largest municipal clinic associations, the Frankfurt-Main-Taunus clinics. In the course of the preparations for the merger, 110 of 1,700 jobs were cut. Frankfurt's director of health Rosemarie Heilig justified the move in the city's parliament (Römer) by pointing to the clinics' "structural deficits." Heilig is a member of the Greens, the same party as Bsirske.

Martin explained that questions of working hours and working conditions without stress were no longer concerns of the trade union. He said, "We have long been criticizing the percentages being demanded. A pay increase by fixed amounts would benefit low earners far more. Those who earn more look forward to a pay rise too."

Asked about working conditions, the nurse reported that staff

coverage was increasingly thin. "But this is simply presented as being unavoidable. The wage increase reigns supreme over everything, as if it will cure all of our problems, which it won't."

He continued, "We have had the warning strikes for a few weeks. Yet we are dealing with the fusion and privatization plans. Höchst hospital is the second largest in Frankfurt. It is enormously important for the west of Frankfurt and outlying region. Actually, it is irreplaceable."

Even prior to the merger workers faced relentless pressure on their jobs and conditions. "The laundry was closed years ago," Martin said, "since then all of the washing is transported to Bavaria; in spite of the petrol prices, all the stuff is washed in Franken. Food is still prepared by us. Cleaning and the preparation of beds were outsourced long ago. In terms of care, the hospital's KPHs (nursing assistants) are helping us for the moment. There are occasionally times of crisis, when it is really bad, external personnel, from a private contractor, come to help for a few weeks."

There will be no positive changes resulting from the merger. There are already no reliable monthly schedules, and as an experienced nurse, one must be ready, "planned or unplanned," to shift between wards, which is another major burden. The reason for this is obvious, Martin said, "They are trying to cover all of the work with internal staff, without hiring any more people."

Nurses have to document every move they make. "For an experienced nurse, it is almost an insult. One has to constantly document what one has done. That the napkin was laid out with the food, excuse me, but I could also document that I opened the door to come in. In the past, it was not so extreme." He said it would be preferable to use this time to provide care.

Martin said of the current wage conflict that neither the merger nor the stressful working conditions were being discussed. All of this is accepted as inevitable, including by the works council in Höchst, where the SPD and Left Party hold sway. "It appears as though everything has been agreed between the works council and management beforehand," he said.



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