

Germany: Public service trade union announces extension of protest strikes

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In the last few weeks, more than 100,000 public service workers employed by federal and local governments have been involved in limited, so-called “warning strikes.” They are determined to combat poor working conditions and the low wages paid to child care workers, garbage workers, social workers and many others.

On March 28, Frank Bsirske, the leader of the workers’ union Verdi, announced plans to significantly expand the warning strikes after the Easter break. At a rally in the city of Saarbrücken, Bsirske said that a broad, nationwide mobilisation would be carried out beginning April 9 following the failure of the public employers’ association to make any sort of offer. The strike wave would include workers involved in child care, waste disposal, airports and hospitals.

The announcement of further strikes is Verdi’s response to the growing anger and militancy of public employees, who are not prepared to accept constant reductions in staff levels and increased workloads while their wages stagnate or decline.

Bsirske’s strike announcement and his criticism of the stance taken by the municipal employers’ associations cannot hide the fact that Verdi—in this, as in all previous contract negotiations—stands on the side of the employers and the government. The union has actively supported the formation of a new grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and conservative parties and is actively backing the government. For almost six weeks, the union has placed the current labour dispute “on the back burner,” limiting its response to short protest strikes and inconsequential “pinprick” actions.

In fact, Bsirske’s exclamations of indignation about the “refusal of employers” to respond is utterly hypocritical. Three rounds of negotiations with the

employers’ side had already been scheduled at the start of the dispute. The second round of talks on March 12 took place just one day after the new interior minister took up his post and it was common knowledge that the outgoing minister would not make an offer. Even the latest announcement of further warning strikes in the run-up to the third round of negotiations on April 15/16, heavily promoted in the media, was planned in advance to prepare for an eventual sellout.

Many public service workers are familiar with the well-established tactics of the union when it comes to contract bargaining. They are very aware of the close links between Verdi and municipal and state administrations—a dense web of nepotism, complicity and corruption existing at all levels of administration and the trade union hierarchy. The Verdi bureaucratic ladder is a well-worn path for career advancement.

The negotiating partners have known each other for many years. Frank Bsirske was formerly on the employers’ side and imposed job cuts in his function as a former personnel director in Hanover. The current head of the municipal employers’ associations (VKA), Thomas Böhle, is a member of the SPD and also a member of Verdi.

The miserable working conditions throughout public service are a direct result of the harsh austerity policies initiated two decades ago by an SPD-Green Party government and implemented since then by all subsequent administrations in close cooperation with Verdi. The government policy of a limit on debt, the so-called “debt brake,” and the resulting cuts and austerity measures, has led to a massive loss of jobs.

A programme on the ARD television channel at the end of last year revealed that well over 100,000 jobs are lacking in public services. In schools, crèches and kindergartens alone, 52,000 additional skilled workers

are needed, according to a recent study. Public services are being starved of funds and subsequently face collapse was the conclusion drawn by the report.

The situation is especially bad in the patient care sector. Hospitals, retirement and nursing homes have faced one austerity programme after the other. Strikers told the WWS that the demand for a 6 percent wage increase is crucial. The current pay level is so low that hardly anyone is prepared to carry out their demanding work. Growing workloads and the pressure to work overtime make the situation even worse. The heavy workloads have led to many nurses and care workers swapping permanent positions for temporary employment, although this is inevitably bound up with financial losses. For many, it is the only way to escape intolerable levels of stress.

In this regard, a letter written by an indignant nurse to the new federal health minister, Jens Spahn (CDU), is significant. Jana Langer is a surgical nurse and writes: "Before I blow a fuse, first Mr. Spahn gets a letter." She accuses the minister of lacking any sort of qualifications to head such an important ministry and expresses her indignation that the new minister immediately went onto the offensive against the poor and unemployed receiving paltry Hartz IV social welfare payments.

"It is very important that we make clear there is more to human welfare than your ignorant and defamatory announcements in recent weeks directed at people who urgently need our social protection," she writes.

She then addresses the commercialisation of the health care system. "Making money out of sickness may be fine for you and may well fill your wallet, but for us it is unethical and reprehensible." Langer asks, "Why is it necessary to make horrendous profits out of illness? Why is privatisation being increasingly being promoted? The beneficiaries of this system are shareholders and the managers of facilities; neither patients nor residents benefit from this policy."

The effects of privatisation are devastating. In order to increase profits, cuts to personnel and spending are carried out at the expense of employees, especially nurses and care workers. This was no longer acceptable. She "and thousands of my colleagues" expected "a reversal in this system."

Just a few hours after Jana Langer published this letter on Facebook, she received enthusiastic support

from many thousands of colleagues, carers and friends.

With her letter, Langer addressed an issue with far-reaching consequences: the fight against the dramatic deterioration of working conditions in hospitals, nursing homes and throughout public service requires a political struggle against the government.

The new administration is determined to resist and defy popular opinion and opposition to an even greater extent than previous governments. In order to finance its programme of military rearmament, it plans to implement further drastic cuts in social spending and suppress any resistance with police-state methods.

Verdi works closely with the government as it has done with previous governments. The warning strikes reveal the power of public service workers. More than 6 million are employed by federal, state and local governments, working at airports and in the cities, with responsibility for street cleaning, garbage collection and public transport, in day-care centres and social facilities, in hospitals and old people's homes, in libraries, in theatres or in adult education centres, in administration, swimming pools, forestry, fire stations, etc.

But Verdi has no intention of mobilising this power. On the contrary, its job is to control and suppress such power. In order to fight for better wages and working conditions, to defend their rights and social gains, public service workers must break with the union and set up independent action committees. Such committees should establish contact with other sections of workers in factories and other countries facing very similar problems to organise a joint struggle.



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