

“Berlin burns:” Firefighters oppose austerity policies of state government

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For over a week, more than 100 firefighters have held a protest vigil against the devastating conditions in Berlin’s emergency services. On top of poor working conditions, too few staff and old equipment, the introduction of a 12-hour shift system at the beginning of the year proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

On a small square in front of the Town Hall, wedged in and barely visible between the fences of construction sites, the firefighters have stood in alternating shifts in the rain and cold since March 26. A large brazier bears their motto—“Berlin burns”—a symbolic sign to draw attention to the “life-threatening situation for the Berlin population.”

The firefighters’ protest is directed against the Social Democratic-Left Party-Green Party coalition that runs the Berlin state government. Under the pressure of an imminent collapse of the emergency rescue system, the public service union Verdi, the Police Union (GdP) and the German Fire Brigade Trade Union (DFeuG) have been forced to set up the vigil.

In a conversation with a *World Socialist Web Site* team, the firefighters made clear that the Berlin parties of all stripes are responsible for the crisis.

Bernd is the Team Leader at the Berlin-Tegel Fire Station and has been with the Berlin fire brigade for 32 years. He told the WSW that under-funding has been a problem since 1989.

“The cuts started 30 years ago and just got worse and worse,” he said. “We are at the end of our rope. It is starting to be dangerous for the people of Berlin. We cannot support that!”

His colleague added, “At the moment, we are conducting 1,500 operations per day and we have the same number of staff as at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall [1989], i.e., around 4,000 people, including administrative staff. About 600 operational officers work during the day in approximately 35 stations. We had the same number of operational officers in West Berlin before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but with only up to 700 operations per day.”

Berlin’s professional fire brigade, which handled some 280,000 operations in 2007, had more than 430,000 in 2016. Last year, there were around 918,000 emergency calls. That is more than a doubling of the workload compared to 2016. The skyrocketing number of emergency calls and the high level of sick leave lead to permanent overload.

Asked whether the staffing at his fire station in Tegel was sufficient, Bernd replied, “No, not all jobs are filled. Even if they

were all filled, there would not be enough people.”

According to the daily *Berliner Morgenpost*, 26 jobs are vacant in the emergency call centre alone.

The workload is extremely high. Bernd’s colleague said, “We cannot keep up with all the work at the station.” In addition to rescue operations, the firefighters handle cleaning, maintenance, documentation of the operations, the provision of resources and much more.

One of the firefighters is responsible for technology and the vehicles. He contacts the workshop when something is broken. They must also ensure in the telecommunications service that “everything we have regarding radio and telecommunications equipment” is maintained.

Since the beginning of the year, the Berlin fire brigade has declared a state of emergency dozens of times, which means the workload has reached 90 percent of capacity. As a result, fire trucks must be taken out of service to maintain the emergency ambulance service.

In order to avoid a final collapse, the authorities and the city administration have promised to keep a “tactical reserve of ambulances” at each station from now on.

Several firefighters emphasized that the existing reserves have already been in use for a long time. “Peak loads—as previously only on New Year’s Eve—are a daily occurrence today,” said one.

There is a great deal of criticism at the emergency call centre of the “standardized emergency call query protocol”—SNAP for short. When asked about this, the firefighters explained that a computer system makes certain decisions over and above the human staff. “Depending on which answer comes up, the computer will pose you another question tree. Then an alert queue is formed.” On this basis, forces are dispatched.

The problem is that basically every call becomes an emergency, no matter how absurd the answers to the individual questions. Said one firefighter, “That’s our big handicap. We often go on operations where there is no real emergency.” But if the staff decided against the computer protocol, “that would be a breach of the law—refusing a command. That could theoretically lead to a warning.”

In addition to the increased workload, the firefighters face the new 12-hour shift system that was introduced at the beginning of 2018. Bernd recalled that because of “the misery with the lack of staff” 10 years ago, working hours were increased from 44 to 48 hours per week.

“It was said to be just ‘temporary,’ until we have more people again.” Firefighters accumulated so much overtime “that we sometimes had a 55- to 56-hour week. This meant we were violating applicable working time laws.” Only after years, and only because firefighters sued the state of Berlin, the authority had to pay for at least part of the overtime worked.

With the 12-hour shift system, there should be no overtime. But the shifts are even harder. If you had four days off when there was a 24-hour shift service, it will now be only 2.5 days free. This is a hot topic.

One firefighter explained the shift pattern: “For example, we start Monday on the day service, which lasts from 7am to 7pm. On Tuesday, we have to switch to the night service, from 7pm until Wednesday morning at 7am. On Thursday, we again have the 12-hour day service, and Friday the night service until Saturday morning at 7am. Then we have 2.5 days off.”

Since the new shift system means firefighters don’t work their full 48-hour week, they have to take on special shifts and participate in further training in the 2.5 days off or between shifts.

One firefighter complained: “I came home yesterday from the day service and gave my children a good night kiss. Then I watched television for two hours. I had to go back to work at 5am this morning.” Another added with frustration, “Sometimes you sleep at the station because it is just not worth going home.”

All confirmed that this very high workload had consequences for sick leave. And there is still overtime, which would be frozen or not recorded.

“We do not have enough people in charge of the emergency services,” one firefighter said. Often 10 or 11 operations are conducted in 12 hours. Each operation must then be documented, but there is no time for this.

One of the firefighters spoke of the bureaucratic pressure of the station supervisors. Their answer is, “Then just come two hours earlier to the night service and write up the documentation then.”

Another firefighter said, “We always have the same colleague driving the emergency vehicle at the station. The one who sits behind the wheel cannot change roles. He is worn out. He can drive 11 times in 12 hours. He drives up to 150 km in one shift. In addition, he has to assist the emergency doctor and draw out medication.”

The waiting time for an ambulance is sometimes up to 40 minutes. To comply with deadlines, the first best vehicle is often sent on an emergency call to provide first aid. “An emergency call comes in for a cut injury and a fire truck with a crew of six is sent,” one firefighter said. “This is because the people at the control centre are obliged to send any vehicle at all, if no ambulance is available.”

The firefighters agreed that their working conditions were the result of a false policy. Bernd emphasized: “The situation is also due to the health care system. Everyone is sick. The ambulances are sometimes lining up at the ramp. We cannot get up and when we get to the ramp, we have to wait because the nurses are overwhelmed.”

When asked about the further specialization of hospitals planned by the state coalition government, Bernd explained that this already caused great problems. “The worst, however, are the

intensive cases,” he said. “The patient is fighting for his life and we cannot get a bed for him because the intensive care units are overloaded. It can happen that you have to drive a heart attack victim right across Berlin.”

Although according to Verdi, 1,000 additional firefighters are acutely needed to cover the emergency services, only about 350 new jobs are being created. At the same time, more fire stations are being opened and the Berlin fire department is to receive 36 new ambulances, 20 emergency medical vehicles and 16 fire-fighting and specialist vehicles.

Bernd said he would be happy “if 350 were hired every year.” He added, “It would be better to increase it to 500 annually, because many are retiring.”

Another firefighter said, “We need an immediate million-euro program.” Another argued that the men also had to be better paid. “Many do not want to join us because even the relief organizations pay more.”

The situation facing firefighters has made clear the contempt with which the Berlin government deals with social issues. Nor is confidence high in the unions.

One firefighter left his union because it had done too little, and in 2015 there was almost a wildcat strike. Bernd confirmed, “That was Operation Drumbeat. But then it was said, anyone who stays at home, even with a medical certificate, has to reckon with the consequences. It went all over the radio and television and the pressure on colleagues was so high that on the day of the call, sick leave at a record low.”

The firefighters hope their struggle will become better known. “On our Facebook page, we get an incredible amount of solidarity,” said Bernd. He said they received greetings from firefighters and their families from Germany and around the world, as well as declarations of sympathy from various professions.

They want to continue their vigil, although it is hardly noticeable, stuck between fences. Verdi says no other place for the vigil has been approved. This makes it clear that the firefighters cannot rely on Verdi and the other unions to manage even the simplest task involved in organizing a vigil.



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