

Strikes in Germany's public sector as anger mounts over wages and working conditions

Our reporters
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The public-sector union Verdi and other trade unions expanded strikes by public service workers in Germany on Tuesday and Wednesday. According to trade union sources, 60,000 workers took strike action in the states of Berlin, Brandenburg, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse, North Rhein-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, and Bremen. Many thousands participated in demonstrations and rallies.

The trade unions are calling for a 6 percent wage increase, or at least a raise of €200. The strikes had a particular impact at airports in Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Bremen, with Lufthansa forced to cancel 800 flights. Strikes were also held at state-run kindergartens, public transport, rubbish collection, city services, municipal-owned hospitals, and regional savings banks.

The strikes are part of a broader mobilisation of the working class throughout Europe and internationally. Workers in France are striking against Macron's plans to privatise the public railways, in Britain lecturers are fighting to defend their pensions, and in the US teachers in many states are striking and protesting for better wages and working conditions.

As in the other countries, the strike in Germany is dominated by a glaring contradiction. While workers in all sectors are outraged at never-ending real-wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions, the unions are doing everything in their power to suppress this anger and prevent a genuine struggle.

Verdi collaborates closely with the federal government, which is the employer in the current collective bargaining talks. When the Social Democrats (SPD) and conservative parties presented their coalition agreement in February, Sylvia Bühler, a member of Verdi's national executive, praised it as a "big step in the right direction" and as an "important roadmap." Reiner Hoffmann, head of the German Trade Union Association (DGB), spoke out in favour of the grand coalition, which as well as carrying out the largest military spending increases since the Second World War is also planning major social attacks.

The unions are only calling the strikes to allow workers to let off steam and ensure the unions maintain control over the situation. Behind the backs of the workers, they have long since reached a deal with Interior Minister Horst Seehofer. If they get their way, the unions intend to present the agreement after the third round of talks scheduled for April 15-17 in Potsdam. All indications point to a similar result as IG Metall, which at the beginning of the year dropped its demand for a 6 percent pay increase to an effective annual raise of 2.2 percent. The ability of the government and trade unions to carry this off depends on the political development of the working class. The outrage among workers is extremely high.

Regardless of the group of workers one speaks to and irrespective of in which city, the same picture emerges. After the state spent hundreds of billions of euros to bail out the banks, every area of social life is being subjected to spending cuts. However, workers are no longer prepared to accept the domination of the profit motive in every aspect of public life. WSWs reporters spoke with striking workers in Berlin, Cologne,

Dortmund, Frankfurt, Munich and Karlsruhe.

The largest rally in the country took place at the Heumarkt in Cologne. Valentin, who previously worked in health care and is now employed in the administrative logistics department for Cologne's hospitals, was convinced that the turnout would have been even greater if conditions on the wards were not so precarious.

"It is often the case that the emergency staffing level is more than what we have as standard staffing levels on many wards," he said. Under these conditions, nurses don't want to leave the wards in the lurch. Nurses, Valentin reported, therefore are not just interested in a pay increase, but also improved working conditions. "I am here because the gulf between those at the very top and bottom of society continues to grow, and we have to take to the streets to increase wages accordingly."

Striking health care workers in Munich also pointed to terrible working conditions. "There is a staff shortage," said one worker. "At a certain point, we can no longer adequately care for the patients. Politically something has to change, because the hospitals are totally dependent upon the legal system, and they just enforce this on the workers."

In Berlin, where several hundred gathered on Friedrichstraße, reporters met many workers from the Charité university hospital. Christian and Stefan work there as delivery drivers in material distribution. They are among a small group of non-medical workers whose jobs have not been outsourced to the subcontractor CFM. They therefore have somewhat better pay rates and more job security. Nonetheless, both men came to the demonstration to show solidarity with their CFM colleagues.

Stefan explained that staffing levels are so bad that workers often have to do double shifts. "The amount of work done by two workers in the past is now done by one," he said. And even then, responsibilities are often increased further by absences. Things are even worse for health care workers. "When I bring medication to the wards at night, there are usually just two nurses there. Red lights are going off everywhere, and often they can't even accept the delivery," he reported.

As Stefan was speaking, Marco, a young nurse who completed his training a year ago, joined the discussion. He immediately agreed with what had been said and explained that it is often impossible to check if the medication delivered is correct. Among other wards, he has worked in the leukaemia ward, where large quantities of medication are delivered.

"Every morning when you come to work, you're hoping nobody rings or there is an emergency because then you won't manage your round," said Marco. The round also includes filling drips with medication. If this is not done on time, patients are not only put at risk, but in the case of antibiotics, germs resistant to medication can develop.

"We often have to change catheters and put on bandages in the middle of the night, because there is just no time during the day," he said. Very ill patients have to be woken and bothered at three or four in the morning. Colleagues often perform paperwork after their shifts to ensure the patients get care. He also reported of instances where patients were left lying in their own excrement for hours, because, in spite of the nurses'

best efforts, care could not be provided.

Overburdened and exploited workers are not only to be found in the health sector. Cindy, a semi-governmental staff council chair and trainer at the Office for Canals and Shipping in Brandenburg, explained that trainees are only employed there for a maximum of two one-year contracts. Afterwards, in spite of the highly specialised nature of the job training, the young people have to look for new jobs.

Her colleague, Frank, is 61 and will soon be working part-time. If someone is hired to take his place, his or her starting wage will be two pay brackets below his, equating to some €500 less per month. At the same time, work-related stress has increased dramatically: “Three people are now doing what five did before.” According to Frank, they are always under pressure and spend their time writing letters of apology. He is particularly concerned that workers on lower pay grades receive a substantial wage increase. They therefore see the demand for an increase of at least €200 as particularly important.

Two workers at the pension insurance agency for Berlin and Brandenburg who did not want to give their names for fear of retribution also detailed a significant increase in responsibilities on the job. A growing number of specialist tasks have been delegated to workers on lower pay grades over recent years, one of the workers reported. “In effect, this is an indirect wage cut, because people are getting less money for doing the same job,” he added.

His colleague reported that there is a shortage of staff in IT. Workers are therefore put under a lot of pressure. If someone is absent due to sickness, the post remains unoccupied. As a result, many workers are forced to give up holidays and work overtime and at weekends for no extra pay. “We took up this career because we had a social conscience. This is being exploited now, because nobody wants someone not to get their pension at the beginning of the month,” he added. A 34-year-old colleague suffered physical injuries due to the amount of work, and many others suffered burnout.

At the airport in Frankfurt, Giuseppe, who drives a water tanker on the apron, spoke about massive real-term pay cuts. “I compared my paycheck with my wages 10 and 15 years ago, and the truth is that including holiday bonuses, I get around €3,000 less than I did 10 years ago!” he said. However, work-related stress and responsibilities have increased during this period.

Abdul did not only participate in the strike for a wage increase of a few percent, but to draw attention to the unbearable conditions for baggage handlers. He works for FraGround, a subsidiary of Fraport, the airport’s operator, and he is especially affected by workplace stress. “There are practically no regulations for changing shifts. I have to work seven days in a row and then often on my days off an additional shift—it’s a disaster!” Although he is young and strong, he still felt that the way workers are dealt with here is “outrageous.”

Pre-school workers participated in the rallies in many cities. Magda and Anna attended the rally in Karlsruhe to secure societal recognition for their demanding jobs. “It begins with the training, you don’t get paid for it. It makes the career very unattractive,” they told us. Yet their jobs are crucial.

Fatma, who is also a pre-school teacher, explained, “Children need free space and also attention. But although we do our best, we can’t give them that under these conditions.” Fatma’s colleague Anna made clear that a fundamental principle is at stake in the strike, saying, “The issue isn’t just money, I’m here because of the entire system.” Stress, illness and overworked staff create a vicious circle for children and pre-school teachers, added Fatma.

At the rally in Dortmund, Heike, a pre-school teacher, explained the new responsibilities she has had to assume. “The demands made of us have constantly increased over recent years. When children go to school, they should know the language, be able to count, sit still, listen, and

concentrate, and they should have a degree of independence. All of this is expected.

“We are all happy to do this, but sometimes you just need time for the children. And when I have 25 to 30 children and there are only two of us, that is nowhere near enough,” she noted. Absences due to illness, holidays and training leave are not managed well, resulting in frequent staff shortages.

Heike added that she went on strike because the profession of a pre-school teacher is not attractive to young people due to low pay. “Yet we have constantly increasing demand. Children come to us younger, both parents often have to work. So we also need full-day places, because the parents’ work schedules are not really what they would need to be for a couple to raise children. The burdens increase, the demands grow, but pay is not increasing at a corresponding rate,” she said.

Heike was well aware that repeated claims over recent years that there is no money has been part of a policy directed against the well-being of society. However, in light of the toothless strikes over the same period, she was unsure what could be done about it. “We strike again and again and end up with peanuts,” she said. “So much has been saved on staffing costs. There is no land in sight.”

Verdi’s deliberate restricting of the strikes was also discussed in Berlin. “The trust in the trade unions is declining,” said Marco, the nurse. “There are no real strikes, like in France, here. But that’s what many people want.” Christian, the delivery driver, intervened, “We all really need to strike together. But first one group strikes, then another.”

At the airport in Frankfurt, Michael, who works as a loadmaster, was outraged, stating, “It is good that resistance is growing. What I, as a skilled worker, see is the board making a lot of money, they’re stuffing their pockets full. And as a skilled worker, you are told, ‘There’s just no money.’ I can’t accept that anymore.” He was in full agreement with French workers, he said. “In France, the strike is a much more accepted part of society. Unfortunately, that’s much less the case in Germany. I wish things were the same here.”

In Karlsruhe, industrial mechanics Marcel, Niklas and Felix, who work for the public transport authority in Freiburg, discussed the need for the international unification of workers. “If the French can do it, we can do it, too,” Felix said enthusiastically. Asked what he thought about teachers in the United States organising independently of the unions in large Facebook groups, Niklas answered, “That was brave! I think it’s important to stand up for your demands, even when the unions don’t support you.”

“You can only agree with that,” Marcel added. “We all need to act together.”

Verdi’s phony strikes underscore that workers in Germany, France, the United States and around the world confront the same fundamental issues. They are not only faced with reactionary governments that are rearming, waging war, and launching attacks on workers’ social rights, but also by unions collaborating closely with the government. Workers can only defend their interests in a united socialist movement based on the independent mobilisation of the working class.



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