

German public service strikers fear sell-out

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The dissatisfaction was palpable at the protest strike on Wednesday in Darmstadt. Along with thousands of day care workers, nurses, garbage workers and social workers, thousands of Deutsche Telekom workers also demonstrated.

The public service union Verdi is using this week's actions to "let off steam". If possible, a deal will be signed at the weekend, at the third round of negotiations. As far as workers are concerned, the previous wage offer by the public sector employers is a provocation—it only provides a 3.3 percent increase for two years and no basic allowance for low paid workers—and many are calling for a real change.

In many areas of the public sector, workers face unbearable conditions and slave wages. Strikers took WSWS flyers with interest to read about the railway workers' strikes in France and the teachers' strike in the United States. "You don't hear anything about this at all. It's right that they're fighting back!" said young nurses from Odenwald. "We hope that something will finally change here. It cannot go on as things are right now."

Apprentices and young workers were well represented. A group of them had brought along their own banner saying, "Provide money for refugee assistance, hospitals, education and social work!" Again and again, participants expressed concern and anger over the rightward turn in politics and the years of sell-outs by the unions.

For example, many educators and day-care workers had already participated in the strike three years ago. "I really hope it won't be like it was three years ago," said Katharina, a teacher from Darmstadt. "We were all on strike then, but our strike was strangled. What came out of it? A few euros more—and they were quickly gone. We did not like it at all."

Joshua, who works in the care sector in southern Hesse, said, "The government currently spends a lot of

money on armaments. And they tell us, we have no money for social spending, for kindergartens, etc. That's a lie: the money is there, you just have to redistribute it. Also, how they deal with refugees, that they don't even let them into Europe, that's a scandal, that shouldn't exist."

He had come as part of a group from the Odenwaldkreis health centre in Erbach. "With us, for example, the medical and laboratory staff and the occupational therapists in training get no money at all," said Joshua. "They have to pay for everything out of their own pockets. For some who don't have rich parents, it's pretty tough."

His colleagues added that, especially in the care sector, many workers are completely underpaid. The additional 8,000 care workers promised by the grand coalition would be "absolutely inadequate." "We're fighting for something completely different," says a young colleague.

Niklas reported: "At the moment it's very bad for the patients. There is such a rush, that mistakes could happen; that is completely nonsensical." Niklas says he came to Darmstadt because he hopes "that things will finally change, not just for us, but generally for the care sector."

Entire contingents of workers were also present from the municipal utilities, garbage collection and administrative offices. Anyone who spoke to the strikers could feel the enormous dissatisfaction with their conditions, which goes far beyond Verdi's immediate pay claim.

Marcel and Claudia belong to the Kita (day care) staff of the city of Darmstadt. They do not assume that the pay claims will be achieved on a one-to-one basis. "It would really be time to evaluate our profession!" said Claudia. "Parents entrust their loved ones to us, their children. We work with living beings, we lay the foundation for the whole life of children." Marcel said,

“Before a state upgrades its military and puts 70 billion in its armed Forces, they should put 70 billion into children’s education. It’s the children who determine our future.”

Anton, 50, a garbage worker from Rüsselsheim, declared categorically, “We will not accept the current offer.” He had come to Darmstadt from Rüsselsheim on one of ten buses, all from the public sector. “Our conditions are getting worse. Things keep going down,” Anton reported. “If you’re new to it, you have to start with worse conditions. They play us off against each other. That’s not okay—but where can you find another job at the age of 55?”

Manuela, who works in youth and vocational support in Darmstadt, addressed the issue of old-age poverty: “Often it’s women who work in the care sector and in education. And when they retire, they fall completely into old-age poverty. Many have worked for a lifetime, and as retirees they depend on the food banks.”

She did not want to talk about politics at all: “My anger is too great. Where should I start?” Above all, she came to the protest out of solidarity: “The gulf between rich and poor is now becoming enormous. Even the middle class is fighting. If you compare it to what the public sector used to be, you can see how much it was gone down.”

Several older employees of Deutsche Telekom from Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and the Saarland, who went on strike for two days, saw the collective bargaining round rather sceptically. “Whether the protest warning strike is a success is yet to be decided,” said Frank, a 40-year-old telecoms worker.

Udo , who works at Deutsche Telekom, said he expects “a reasonable 4 percent rise for 12 months. Anything below that would be unbearable for us.” It cannot be, he continued, “that the profits that this group make on the backs of its employees only benefit the executive board.”

Udo listened with great interest about the strikes in France, Britain and the US. It was “right to organize against global corporations worldwide,” he commented. “Telekom is now a global ‘carrier,’ so we need to unite not only nationally, but internationally as well, and work together with colleagues in the United States and around the world, wherever workers are oppressed.”

Udo fully expected that Verdi would not come up

with what the colleagues have demanded. “It would not be the first time,” he said. Then, many could resign. He saw a connection with the dividing up of Telekom into many individual areas, saying, “The structure of Telekom has changed completely, the old structures have been smashed up.” Staff had been systematically shed: “When there are bottlenecks, it’s just like in the auto industry, as at Opel-Peugeot, outside labour is also hired at Telekom, who work on worse terms.”

Another Telekom employee explained that they should “get out the pitchforks and march to Berlin. That’s where the corrupt and anti-social politicians are in power, who are lining their own pockets.”



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