

“Berlin is Burning”: Berlin firefighters’ campaign of resistance raises political issues

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
18 April 2018

For over three weeks, firefighters have gathered in front of the Berlin City Hall to protest against catastrophic working conditions and a lack of staff. Their protest has won considerable support. The recently launched petition #BerlinBrennt (Berlin is burning) has already received 63,000 signatures. “Berlin Is Burning” stickers have been distributed across Germany.

With their vigil, firefighters have drawn attention to the devastating effects for key areas of public provision resulting from the vicious austerity policies of the Berlin Senate. More than 1,000 posts need to be filled in the fire brigade, and pay is poor for firemen working 12-hour shifts in the course of a 48-hour week. The number of emergency rescue operations has rocketed as a consequence of the city’s rapidly growing population. The work pressure is unbearable, and on occasions, the waiting times for the arrival of an ambulance in Berlin is up to 40 minutes.

Spending cuts have affected all areas of public service. Three thousand jobs are lacking in elderly people’s care, according to official data. The partial privatisation of state-owned hospitals and the fall in capacity levels due to the reduction of the number of hospital beds, together with cuts to medical and nursing staff, have resulted in logjams in emergency rooms and the rejection of ambulances with patients who are no longer admitted to overworked intensive care units.

A series of austerity programmes have turned Berlin into the “capital of poverty.” At least 3,000 teachers are lacking for the new school year beginning in August. There is a lack of education staff, school and kindergarten places, decently paid jobs and affordable housing, just to name a few examples. Every third child, a total of 175,000 minors, is dependent on miserly Hartz IV payments and is officially poor. One

in six adults is at risk of poverty. Despair and misery can be seen on almost every street corner. Thousands of homeless people live on the streets of Berlin.

In order to conduct a successful struggle in the fire service and in public services as a whole, it is necessary to address a number of political facts:

Firstly, all of the political parties represented in the Berlin Senate and the German Bundestag support the official policy of budget and social cuts. This also applies to the coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens, which currently governs in Berlin.

The social devastation in Berlin was accelerated by the SPD-Left Party “Red-Red” Senate (2001-2011) led by Klaus Wowereit. While at a federal level, the SPD-Green Party government headed by Gerhard Schröder lowered taxes for the rich, announced its austerity Agenda 2010 programme and passed the Hartz laws, the Berlin Senate resigned from the employers’ association in order to reduce wages and salaries in the public service by 12 percent. It cut subsidies for tens of thousands of council apartments, sold off the largest state-owned housing company, GSW, to international real estate speculators and privatised Berlin’s water supply along with numerous clinics.

This was part of an international policy that has resulted in an explosive growth in the number of millionaires and billionaires worldwide. Currently, eight billionaires possess the same wealth as the poorer half of the world’s population! At the same time, the numbers of poor and precariously employed workers have increased dramatically, as have the levels of stress at work. Schools, health care and public infrastructure are disintegrating everywhere.

It is not possible to stop and reverse this trend without encroaching on the assets and power of speculators, the

banks and the rich—i.e., without the struggle for a socialist programme. Such a fight, however, is categorically rejected by the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens. They do not represent the interests of the workers, but rather the interests of a wealthy middle class that benefits from capitalist exploitation.

The money necessary to improve public services and overcome poverty is there, but the ruling elite is instead investing in arming the military and police to prepare for future wars and to suppress the class struggle.

The new federal government, a grand coalition, has agreed upon the biggest rearmament programme since Hitler and a massive increase in police. At the same time, new Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (SPD) adheres to the policy of a balanced budget of his Christian Democratic predecessor, Wolfgang Schäuble. This means that the cost of rearmament will have to be paid for by further cuts to public service and social welfare payments.

Michael Müller, the current mayor of Berlin, will play along with his SPD colleague Scholz. Just a few weeks after the last Berlin election in the fall of 2016, the new Red-Red-Green Senate in Berlin agreed on its own massive armaments programme for the police and all of the security services, amounting to several hundred million euros. Instead of improving the social situation, the Senate is preparing to violently suppress resistance to increasingly intolerable conditions.

Secondly, the main public service union, Verdi, and all other unions are on the side of the Senate in this dispute. Many Verdi officials are members of the SPD, the Left Party or the Greens and sit in the same boat as the Senate. During the rule of Klaus Wowereit, the leader of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, agreed to drastic cuts in personnel in private discussions with the mayor.

Conditions similar to those in the Berlin fire department prevail throughout public services across Germany. Verdi, however, uses its entire organisational machinery to prevent a rebellion against the catastrophic conditions in public service, clinics, nursing homes and schools. Its tactics in the current contract negotiations in the municipalities and at a federal level serve this purpose. The union organises isolated and limited warning strikes to let off steam, with the firm intention of concluding a deal in a third round of negotiations, which will not even cover inflation, but will give public employers a breathing

space for two or three years.

Thirdly, it is completely misplaced to think that the Senate would reverse course under the pressure of a workers' protest or a public petition. Even if it did make a tactical concession, it would inevitably recover the financing involved from another layer of workers—two or three times over.

Only an independent movement of the working class, involving all sectors of the public and private sector, can stop the social counterrevolution. This requires a deliberate break with the unions and the setting up of independent workers' committees to organise resistance and make contact with workers in other sectors, regions and countries.

The protests by Berlin firefighters are part of a growing international mobilisation. In several US states, teachers have been struggling for months against poor working conditions and low wages. Here, once again, the unions involved have sought to strangle the strike movement, but the teachers have resisted. In France, railroad workers, garbage workers, hospital workers, pilots, and students are opposing the Macron government, which intends to rush through a French version of the German Hartz laws.

To be successful, this movement needs a socialist programme. It must fight for workers' governments that organise society and the economy according to the needs of the population and employees, rather than the profit interests of shareholders and speculators.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) fights for such a perspective. In our statement for the Bundestag election last fall, we wrote: "The SGP fights for a society in which the needs of the many stand higher than the profit interests of big business. The super-rich, the banks and the corporations must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the population. Only in this way can the social rights of all be secured. These include the right to an adequately paid job, a first-class education, affordable housing, a secure pension, high quality old-age provisions and access to culture."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact