

# German public service union closes ranks with the government

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The contract deal presented by unions and employers' associations on Wednesday after a third round of negotiations is a major affront to Germany's 2.3 million public service workers, employed by local and federal authorities. Tens of thousands of public service workers have taken to the streets in recent weeks to campaign for better working conditions and higher wages.

For many workers the deal continues in the tradition of previous contracts which have led to a loss of real wages. The deal runs for a total of 30 months and means that, during that time, strikes against the anti-social policies of the country's grand coalition of conservative parties and the social democrats are illegal. This period is equivalent to nearly the entire remaining period in office of the government.

The public service union Verdi, the teacher's union GEW, and the civil servants' union have closed ranks with the government, which plans fierce attacks on the workers. The policy document agreed by the grand coalition calls for the most comprehensive rearmament program since the Second World War. The arms buildup means that tens of billions of euros must cut from other budgets and a police state is being established in order to enforce this policy.

The protest "warning" strikes of recent weeks have shown that workers are not prepared to accept such policies and further deterioration in their working conditions. They took to the streets across the country because levels of exploitation have become intolerable. Emergency conditions exist in hospitals, kindergartens and nursing homes, while refuse disposal agencies, public transport and even administrative offices are also affected.

The unions refused to raise these issues. Instead they sought to dampen workers' anger and direct it into

harmless channels with demands for higher salaries and a series of limited "warning" strikes. They demanded 6 percent more wages over a period of 12 months and more than 10 percent (i.e., a minimum increase of €200 per month) for lower salary groups.

The resulting deal shows that Verdi was never concerned with improving the situation of the workers, but rather is intent on enforcing the government's policies against them. According to the agreement, the average increase in wages with retroactive effect from March 1 is just 3.19 percent. Thirteen months later, wages will increase by another 3.09 percent and on March 1, 2020, by 1.06 percent. Overall, this amounts to an increase of 7.5 percent for a term of 30 months.

However, based on the calculations of the municipal employers' associations, VKA, the actual increase in wages is even lower. The VKA has calculated that an increase in wages by 6 percent over 12 months would cost authorities an extra 6 billion euros. For the current deal they predict extra spending of around 7.4 billion euros over 30 months. This means the real increase in average wages is well below half of the original Verdi claim and only slightly above the predicted rate of inflation.

At the same time the wage increase is very unevenly distributed. According to the figures of the civil servants' union, a worker on level 3 of the salary scale 5, who receives a wage of 2,598 euros (gross), will receive an increase of just 6.8 percent by the end of the 30-month period. On the other hand, those earning 4,274 euros per month in salary bracket 13 will receive an increase of 11.34 percent. According to the head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, the latter income group includes specialists and executives, technicians, engineers and IT specialists, who are urgently needed by the authorities.

The lowest salary groups, on the other hand, will not even receive the 200 euros at the end of 30 months, although this was originally a demand of the union to be paid for 12 months. Those workers currently earning 1,751 euros will receive just 179 euros more over the period of two and a half years. The situation for patient care, social and education workers is especially bad. A worker in the social and education services, on an average salary of 2,106 euros, will receive only 158 euros more by the end of the 30-month period. In addition, there is to be a one-time payment of 250 euros, which is not included in the statistics.

This vile agreement is the result of the close cooperation between the unions and the federal government. It should be noted that at the press conference to announce the deal, Bsirske praised the German interior minister, Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU), in the highest tones, describing him as a “pleasant negotiating partner” with whom he had shared “humorous, relaxed moments” during the negotiations. “I would be quite happy to do many more negotiations with him,” the Verdi boss flirted.

Seehofer is one of the most-right wing figures in the government. He has campaigned against refugees, denounced Muslims and announced plans for a police state. By such means he intends to enforce the government’s program of rearmament and social attacks against the population. The unions have made clear they are ready to play their role to this end.

The contract deal must be seen in direct relation to the plans for rearmament. In their coalition agreement, the conservative (Union) parties and the SPD have estimated that from every euro they can slash from other budgets they will spend 50 cents on the military and 50 cents on civilian conflict intervention. Every cent deducted from public service employees will thus flow directly into the military budget, which is to be doubled over the next six years to a total of at least 70 billion euros.

Workers have reacted to the deal with anger and indignation. This was clear from a number of contributions on the Verdi website. One person writes: “30 months running time? A one-off payment of 250 EUR up to 6 EC? ... I really hope this is a very late, very bad April Fools joke, do they take me for a fool?”

Other comments include: “Launched as a Eurofighter and landed as a paper plane”; “A minimum amount is

only a minimum amount when it counts on the salary scale. The social component (minimum amount) is ... a central component of our demands in this round of contract bargaining! And it has to stay that way !!!”; “Yes, Verdi has managed to completely sell out its members. 30 months, are you joking? More participation in the strikes than we have had for a long time, and we get a 30-month running time? Adios Verdi, had a nice time with you!”

Despite all of the legitimate anger it is necessary to take stock in a sober manner. The unions are no longer workers’ organisations, but serve rather to suppress any resistance to attacks on social gains. As social divisions become more acute and conflicts increase between the major powers to the point of threatening war looming, the unions close ranks with the ruling class and the government.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, SGP) calls on workers to take the strike into their own hands and establish independent action committees. They must immediately contact workers from other industries and other countries to build an international movement against social attacks and war.

Such a movement will inevitably take on political forms and come into confrontation with the government. It requires a socialist perspective directed against capitalism. No social problem can be solved without expropriating the banks and corporations and placing them under democratic control.



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