

Berlin teachers and social workers strike for better working conditions

Our reporters
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According to figures from the Union of Education and Science (GEW) 2,500 teachers and social workers in Berlin went on strike for half a day on Tuesday. Aware of the enormous anger amongst teachers regarding their working condition, the union called the limited strike prior to its first round of negotiations with the teacher's employer, the Berlin Senate.

In fact, both the GEW and the public service union, Verdi, have long worked together with all of the parties which currently form the Berlin Senate—the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party—to impose cuts.

The strike was called on the eve of contract negotiations for public service workers who work in the various German states. Teachers in Berlin earn up to 450 euros less than their colleagues in the rest of Germany. As a result, according to official Senate data, Berlin lacks around 2,000 teachers and its child day-care centres are chronically understaffed. The unions are demanding six percent more pay for public service workers, with an increase of at least 200 euros per month. An additional demand is that Berlin teachers be aligned in the future with their colleagues in other states.

Participation in the strike and protest was far greater than the GEW expected, with around 40 to 50 child day-care centres affected. Thousands of strikers, along with parents and their children, gathered at the Dorothee-Schlegel-Platz near Friedrichstrasse station to campaign for better working conditions and higher wages. Many carried hand-made placards. “We can’t work as badly as we are paid,” one placard read. Another said, “Political failure risks ruining the lives of children.”

All of those present on Tuesday morning were very angry. Heike, who works in a day-care centre after having worked in various precarious jobs for years, said that grave staff shortages were the biggest problem. “In some cases, whole nurseries are manned by trainees who have

yet to graduate.” As a newcomer herself, she was simply thrown into the deep end and was insufficiently trained. The equipment at many day-care centres was catastrophic. “Sometimes I worry about my health when I enter the day-care centre,” she said.

Julia, who is undertaking training in a nursery, also complained about the bad working conditions where 160 children were cared for in a space originally intended for 60 children. The noise alone was unbearable. “It’s like the noise we have here today,” she screamed above the deafening din of the whistles distributed to protesters by the union. “The pay is completely inadequate for what we do,” she said.

“Only better pay will solve the problem of understaffing,” said Jule, who came to the demonstration along with other colleagues from her nursery. “That would be better for the parents, the children and for us.” At the moment, staff shortages meant that many child care workers came to work although they were sick, in order not to let their colleagues down. There was no system of employing substitutes in the event of illness. “Then of course you become really ill,” she said. It is often the case that two teachers are responsible for 40 crèche children and are supported by trainees or other unqualified staff.

A group of social workers working in youth welfare also regarded the lack of staff to be the biggest problem. “We receive 300 euros less than social workers in Brandenburg,” Inga reported. “Child protection is now at risk,” added her workmate Kristin. “Soon we will only have four employees in ten posts.” The situation is further aggravated by the fact that more and more people are moving to Berlin and thus the number of those in need is increasing, but no new jobs are being created.

The office space is also completely inadequate. “They are not even barrier-free for the disabled,” explained Maryem, another colleague. “We had fecal bacteria in our tap water so we could not drink it,” Kristin noted. “How

can we help families under these conditions?”

Most of the protesters expressed scepticism regarding the unions. “Two years ago, the unions said that a two percent pay raise was big success,” Jule declared. “Afterwards it emerged we had to work an extra 24 minutes a day” but nobody had told them about that. “We were told we would get more pay, but they did not tell us what was in the fine print.”

Maryem left the union years ago. “After the last contract negotiations we were worse off than before,” she explained. She also recalled the notorious walk in the forest in 2005 by Verdi boss Frank Bsirske and Berlin’s Senator for Economic Affairs, Harald Wolf. In the course of the walk, the pair of politicians set the course for drastic cuts in the public sector. “Trade unionists are well paid for doing that. Bsirske does not have to worry about his pension. I save people’s lives every day and do have to worry,” Maryem said.

The unions are also playing a despicable role in the current contract bargaining, seeking to suppress any serious resistance to the cuts taking place. Although the tariff dispute affects all public employment groups, the GEW deliberately called out only workers in nursery schools, public schools and workers in the youth welfare offices. The bigger Verdi union boycotted the limited warning strike completely and rejected calling upon its members to strike.

At the rally Tuesday, the GEW allowed representatives of all three Senate parties to speak. Silke Gebel, leader of the Green Party group in the Berlin House of Representatives, Raed Saleh (SPD), and Katrin Seidel of the Left Party all addressed the rally. In allowing them to speak the union was promoting the very same parties with which it has worked for years pushing down workers’ wages and enforcing cuts. Together the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, in collaboration with the unions, have imposed drastic cuts to schools, kindergartens and universities, turning Berlin into Germany’s capital of poverty.

Many strikers therefore are no longer prepared to tolerate the union’s straitjacket. “Actually, all public employees should stand together,” said Jule, especially in view of the fact that contract bargaining had also begun for Berlin transport workers (BVG). “We all have to go on strike together; when we strike alone, nobody notices,” declared Maryem. “A general strike is the way forward. This whole capitalist system has failed us,” said Heike.

When asked about the auto worker strikes in Matamoros, Mexico, which were organised independently

of the unions and are being carried out on the basis of an internationalist orientation, Maryem replied that she had heard of the strike movement. “I wish there was the same sort of energy here. Let’s have more of such actions,” she declared. “I am very impressed. I doff my cap to them!”

Solmas is also enthusiastic about the independent strikes in Matamoros. “They are even worse off than us, and yet they are striking without a union and without strike pay. We should do the same here. Verdi is corrupt, they don’t strike,” she said. “The workers in Matamoros are taking a courageous step,” Jule added.

Heike also spoke of the development of right-wing forces in Germany, which worried her greatly. The sense of uncertainty that resulted from austerity policies provided fertile ground for the right wing. “They had never gone away and they are coming out now.” At the Socialist Equality Party’s (SGP) information table, she bought a copy of the book *Why Are They Back?* which reveals how the extreme right is systematically promoted by the ruling class at times of capitalist crisis.

An SGP candidate for the European elections, Andy Niklaus, attended the demonstration with a team to discuss a strategy based on a common struggle of all workers and the formation of independent action committees. He addressed the experiences of the strikers and explained that workers across Europe and around the world are faced with the same issues. It was necessary therefore to break with the unions and unite internationally.

Niklaus is a bus driver with the BVG and explained why workers needed a socialist perspective in their fight against all of the parties in the Senate and the trade unions. “Only when banks and corporations are expropriated and placed under democratic control can society be transformed to meet people’s needs, and the necessary resources be devoted to education and creating good jobs,” he said. The SGP was able to collect from demonstrators many of the signatures it needs to run its candidates in the European elections.



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