

Tens of thousands strike in Berlin against poor working conditions

Our reporters**14 February 2019**

Tens of thousands of public sector workers participated in a one-day strike in Berlin on Wednesday for wage increases and better working conditions. The anger among the workers was palpable in a march of more than 10,000 from Alexanderplatz to the Brandenburg Gate. By contrast, the trade unions are doing all they can to sabotage the movement and lead it into a dead end.

A total of 140,000 workers in kindergartens, schools, state and local authorities, universities, the fire service, and police were called out on strike. According to figures from the state Senate, 100 kindergartens remained closed. Lessons at 600 schools were cancelled because 4,100 teachers were on strike. Local authority offices ran a limited service.

The unions Verdi, the Education and Science Union (GEW), and German Police Union (GDP) are demanding a 6 percent pay increase or a minimum pay increase of €200 per month for the one million public sector workers employed by Germany's 16 states. Strikes took place in Saxony on Tuesday and in North Rhein-Westphalia today.

Workers who took to the streets in Berlin on Wednesday were not just protesting for wage increases of a few percent as proposed by the unions, which in previous contracts were rapidly eaten up by inflation. They protested against policies that for decades have subordinated every area of social life to the drive for profit.

This is particularly clear in Berlin, which was previously governed by a Social Democrat-Left Party coalition, and now by an SPD-Left Party-Green coalition. Budgets for kindergartens, schools, fire departments, and administrative services were cut to the bone, workers placed under stepped-up pressure, and infrastructure decimated. On the other hand, the police was strengthened while the Berliner Bank Gesellschaft received a multi-billion euro bailout.

Large numbers of kindergarten workers took part in the demonstration and spoke about their terrible working conditions. "Nowadays a child care worker has to deal with 20 children," said kindergarten worker Silvna. "The working conditions and pay are so bad that nobody wants to work in the profession anymore."

In addition, the two childcare workers Larissa and Lisa pointed out that their training is unpaid. To compensate for the chronic staff shortages, kindergartens hire not more childcare workers, but unqualified shift workers who have no experience in education. "Instead, we get a growing number of colleagues from temporary work agencies who have no education qualifications. Some of them don't really help at all," said Lisa.

Dorit, a kindergarten worker, is troubled by the fact that she simply has no time to do quality pedagogical work. "So-called open working amounts in reality to staffing cuts." In addition to 15 trained childcare workers in her kindergarten, there are also ten workers who changed careers to enter the profession, most of whom lack adequate training. "This of course means quality is sacrificed," she added.

Teachers in Berlin tell a similar story. "Our jobs are not only poorly paid and not given enough recognition, but there's a shortage of money everywhere! It's the same as in the care sector," said Katrin, who added that schools are in deplorable condition, with even the school toilets falling apart. "We're always being told that everything will be better under capitalism, but just look at the state of the schools."

She added, "The parents support the teachers, even though the strike means that school was cancelled today. Everyone knows that the money is there. But the money flows in one direction only. And there's nothing there for education."

"We produce teaching materials at our own expense," added Katrin, who also said that she has to clean her classroom. She works as a teacher, but is paid at a much lower rate because she re-entered the profession after a career change. "I only earn €100 more than I did before as a childcare worker," she said. "Much more money needs to be spent on education, but instead it gets spent on weapons and domestic security."

Administrative workers are also angry. Nina works as a secretary at Humboldt University. She joined the strike because she thinks public services are important. "Some things can't be marketised under capitalism." She did not

want to talk about her working conditions, because “you’ll have to print obscenities.” She is “fed up” of the fraudulent claim that there is no alternative. This is untrue and dishonest, she said.

Alongside public sector workers, other workers joined in to show solidarity. Marc worked for Air Berlin and, after its bankruptcy, for Germania, which has now also filed for bankruptcy.

“So long as all sorts of business can be done and money made, everything will be done for companies in this world. However, if something just concerns the employees, they are left to fend for themselves,” he said. He added that one of the many reasons that brought him to the demonstration was that he has volunteered for the fire brigade for 20 years, and that the way that his full-time colleagues are treated is shameful.

Christoph Vandreier and Christopher Lehmann, who are candidates for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) in the European elections, spoke to participants about their experiences with the trade unions, the need to build independent rank-and-file committees, and the necessity of a socialist strategy.

Many of the strikers have no confidence in the unions. Katrin, the teacher, explained that she left and rejoined the union several times over recent years. “I think it’s important that we’re organised, but I don’t feel represented by the unions,” she said.

Dorit left the union in 2003 when it agreed to a new public service contract that amounted to a deterioration of working conditions for many. Ever since, she has had no pay increase in real terms. “And working conditions have only gotten worse,” she added. There is no longer any benefit to be organized in the union, she added. “They just try to keep us quiet and have nothing to do with the rank-and-file.”

She joined the union again because she hopes that this time around, it won’t just talk, but actually do something. But she isn’t holding out much hope, because the unions always try to isolate strikes and limit them. “If everyone went on strike and brought the city to a standstill, we’d certainly have more power. We have to stand together. A general strike would be ideal, because we are all interconnected. A housing crisis, lack of teachers, run-down schools, everything is falling apart.”

Tina also left the trade union because she no longer feels represented by it. Additionally, she wanted to join her colleagues, who are not union members. However, they came to the demonstration nonetheless, even though they receive no wages or strike pay.

Despite this, the workers wore GEW vests, because they wanted to strengthen it against Verdi, which they believe is even worse. “Verdi does everything it can to separate each

sector,” said Tina. Asked her opinion on the fact that the GEW has supported all of the cuts over recent years, and distinguishes itself from Verdi merely with a few left phrases, Tina agreed.

Vandreier explained that on the basis of such experiences, teachers in the United States and striking autoworkers in Mexico are increasingly organising independently of the unions, and that a common international struggle of the working class is necessary. Tina replied that the problems are the same everywhere and politicians are far removed from them.

Fabian, a childcare worker, welcomed the growth of the international class struggle, including in the one-day Belgian national strike Wednesday. “Yes, the numbers will continue to grow. An international framework for strikes would be much better. It would certainly find much more support in other countries. That would be amazing!”

Pointing to social protests in France and growing anger in Germany and social inequality and austerity, Fabian said: “At some point, it will explode. ...While they tell us there is no money, our money is being spent on the military budget and major corporations. What’s going on here?”

He added, “Special teaching status for children with emotional and mental health problems was done away with overnight and replaced with a vague term, ‘illness’. Such problems must be dealt with and cannot be brushed aside, especially for refugee children, who have faced war, death, destruction, and flight from their countries.”

In reply, SGP candidate Christopher Lehmann stressed that the social problems could only be resolved if the power of the major banks and corporations is broken and their resources placed under democratic control by the working class. The capitalist crisis is not only leading to deteriorating working conditions, but a revival of fascism and war, he added. “Workers need a socialist programme to enforce their interests,” said Lehmann.



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