

Mass demonstration by public-sector workers in Berlin

Our reporters
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Over the weekend, the Verdi union signed a sell-out contract with the Berlin authorities, ending a series of warning strikes and protests over low wages, poor working conditions and social cuts. The deal includes a 33-month ban on strikes. The WSWs will publish an article in English on Tuesday analysing the contract betrayal. The following is translated from an article posted last week on the German-language WSWs.

Last Wednesday, thousands of teachers and social workers in Berlin extended the protest strike begun Tuesday morning. More than half of the city's day care centres remained closed and thousands of classes were cancelled. On Wednesday morning, some 10,000 strikers marched from Potsdamer Platz to Alexanderplatz to express their anger at poor working conditions and low wages.

At Alexanderplatz, they joined a rally of about 1,000 employees from district council offices, the state government administration, libraries, the police and the fire service, who had also been called on strike by the service-sector union Verdi, the GEW (Education and Science Union), the Police Union (GdP) and the construction union IG BAU.

The Berlin action was part of widespread protest strikes by state government workers throughout Germany. The unions are demanding a six percent wage increase, equivalent to a monthly increase of at least 200 euros. The employers, whose chief negotiator is Berlin State Finance Senator Matthias Kollatz, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), have not yet made an offer. A new round of negotiations began Thursday in Potsdam.

Nowhere were the demonstrations as large as in Berlin. In the nation's capital, the so-called "Red-Red" coalition that controls the Senate, consisting of the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens, has brought the public sector to the brink of collapse. Many public-sector workers in Berlin receive significantly less than in the neighbouring state of

Brandenburg and face the worst conditions of exploitation.

In particular, the day care centres are chronically understaffed because Berlin educators receive several hundred euros less than their counterparts elsewhere. For this reason, in addition to the percentage increase in salary, the workers in Berlin are calling for their pay to be aligned with the salary structure of the other federal states.

Among the workers participating in the demonstration, anger over intolerable working conditions was enormous. Educator Yvonne told the *World Socialist Web Site* that more and more temporary workers were being employed. These employees were not qualified and had to leave after nine months. "Children face constantly changing staff and we are forced to work more and more overtime," she said.

"The job just has to be made more attractive again," her colleague Tim added. "Only that way can we solve the lack of staff." Instead, more and more jobs were being cut and work pressure increased. There was money available, it just needed to be redistributed, Tim added.

Daniel, who works at an after-school centre, complained about the unbearable staff shortages. As soon as sick leave absences increased in winter or a colleague had to take maternity leave, classes had to be merged, he said. "Sometimes you're in a small room with over 50 kids." On occasion, entire classes would be handed off to young people serving their Voluntary Social Year.

Daniel has been at the after-school centre for five years and seen how things have regressed since then. He said the educators had to look after more and more children for longer periods of time. This was his first strike and he was confident it could make a difference. "Next year, there will be at least 30 new children due to the full-time care provisions for all first- and second-graders, but no more educators will be hired. That's why I've taken to the streets, hoping for the best."

Sofia, a teacher, explained that she has been driven to protest by sheer desperation. Working conditions have deteriorated from year to year.

“We are assigned students with physical and mental disabilities,” she said, “but we do not have the conditions to deal with them. Instead of pedagogues who specialize in supporting the disabled, we get interns. This situation has been made even more difficult with the inclusion of often traumatized refugee children. Many other children cannot stand up to the growing pressure to perform and develop mental health problems, even attempting suicide.”

“That actually affects all social professions,” interjected her colleague Carmen. “It’s even worse in the day care centres. That’s why we are here today, out of solidarity with the educators.”

In general, she said, school was less and less a learning place that was fun, and more and more dominated by standardization and performance pressure. “Everything is focused on functioning, but not on thinking for yourself.”

Many participants in the march expressed scepticism over the unions. This was shown by the fact that of the more than 10,000 demonstrators, only a few hundred came to the rally at Alexanderplatz to follow the speeches of the union representatives.

Teachers Karl and Henning complained that the unions left out the political issues and focused exclusively on salary demands. “We should be able to reach a certain standard in all schools, instead of always investing in elite education,” Hennig said, whereupon Karl added, “I’m sure the average participant today is immediately confronted with less money. Education is a human right and, with the welfare state, forms the foundation of a healthy democracy.”

Tim, a teacher, also addressed political questions. “We always hear that there is no money,” he said, “but when we look around, it’s clear that’s just not true. We just have to get hold of the money—it’s in the pockets of the wealthy and the rich! Even more than 50 years ago, people see us as having enormous power.”

Referring to the education strikes currently taking place in the United States, where teachers are increasingly organizing struggles independently of the unions, he noted that this could also be the future in Germany.

With a view to the strikes in the US, another teacher, Annike, said, “I think the more the social situation here tips over, the more political these demos and strikes will become.”

Sofia sent fighting greetings to her American colleagues

and said, “They have our solidarity. They are paid even worse than us and education in the US depends even more on money.”

She was very critical of the last contract negotiated by the trade unions, “Each time, the unequal payment of the various occupational groups is deepened,” she said. “Those with civil servant status always earn more than salaried teachers, and career changers least of all.”

“The anger with the union is enormous,” said educator Andrea. After years of things getting worse, Verdi and GEW had negotiated only two percent more pay two years ago. “Nobody agreed with that, but the strike was cancelled anyway.” Finally, it turned out that the small salary increase was accompanied by 24 minutes additional work time. “No wonder everyone is angry,” she said.

Durdica, who works at a day care centre, is sceptical about the unions because in 2017 they had concealed the extra work provision and pushed through their sell-out contract. Like others, she hoped that it could be different this time.

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party–SGP) representatives distributed the party’s European election statement, explaining that the experience with the unions was not accidental, but was related to the national and pro-capitalist nature of these organizations. “The unions have become co-managers with the companies, enforcing social attacks against the workers,” said SGP candidate in the European elections, Christoph Vandreier.

This had become particularly clear in Berlin, he said, where the Red-Red Senate, in close cooperation with Verdi and the GEW, had imposed a 10 percent wage cut and gutted the entire public service. “It is therefore necessary for workers to establish their own action committees independent of the trade unions, to organize the strike themselves and expand it nationally and internationally,” Vandreier said.



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