

Germany: Opposition growing among teachers, public sector workers to Verdi's sell-out agreement

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The dissatisfaction with the new collective agreement for public sector workers employed by Germany's states is strong. Internet forums and chat groups are full of angry comments and statements from workers announcing their resignation from the United Services Union (Verdi).

This anger is entirely justified, given that the minimal pay increase barely keeps pace with inflation and rapidly increasing rent prices. The continuation of low-wage jobs in many parts of the public sector, including the care professions, education and childcare, will further exacerbate staff shortages and intensify workloads.

Additionally, Verdi is seeking to impose these miserable wages and working conditions for nearly three years with a contract valid for 33 months. The trade union is insisting that according to Germany's collective bargaining law, labour peace must prevail throughout the agreement's lifetime, meaning no job action can take place.

As usual, Verdi is seeking to impose the sellout agreement with a lying media campaign while ramming through its adoption against opposition from the membership. All media channels are spreading propaganda about an 8 percent pay increase for the workers. Verdi leader Frank Bsirske spoke of a "spectacular success," and claimed it is one of the best agreements Verdi has ever reached.

The anger and outrage felt by many workers is therefore entirely justified. However, it is necessary to draw certain conclusions. Above all, the collective agreement must be viewed in the context of broader political developments.

Since the collapse of the global financial system a decade ago, the crisis of the capitalist system has been intensifying around the world. Hundreds of billions of euros were spent to bail out the banks. This strengthened the financial oligarchy and accelerated the enrichment of the super-rich. In search of investment opportunities and profit, governments partially or entirely privatised and cut large swathes of so-called essential

public services, including municipal services, administration, public transport, healthcare, and recreational, sports and educational institutions.

At the same time, the bank bailout was financed through drastic austerity measures, which had a devastating impact on all areas of the public sector. In 2009, the German government and parliament implemented the debt brake, which was written into Germany's Basic Law. This led to the prohibition of net borrowing for federal, state and local governments. By next year, the ban on borrowing will apply to all 16 states and result in intensified austerity programmes.

Conditions in some areas of the public sector are already catastrophic. Almost all schools are struggling with a shortage of teachers. The workload for many teachers and pre-school educators is unbearable. School buildings are falling apart. Many schools are no longer able to provide scheduled classes. Things are no better in municipal services and other parts of the public sector.

The misery has reached a point at which many workers have their backs to the wall and are saying, "It can't go on like this!" The strikes held over recent weeks during the bargaining rounds demonstrated the readiness of workers to fight.

Conditions in many other countries are similar. Workers are entering into struggle around the world against the never-ending deterioration of working conditions and living standards. They confront the same problems and can only resolve them together.

Teachers and preschool educators have been striking in several US states over recent months and are coming into open conflict with the trade unions. The same is true in Britain. The beginnings of a rebellion by teachers across four continents developed a year ago. Alongside the US and Canada, teachers' strikes took place in North Africa, particularly in Tunisia and Algeria.

In France, protests by teachers at the beginning of last year were followed by a wave of strikes against the government's labour market reforms, and the Yellow Vest movement, which is rebelling against social inequality, poverty and desperate social conditions. Similar strikes and protests have occurred in

Belgium, Spain and several Eastern European countries.

Verdi has responded to this growing radicalisation with a sellout deal, which is aimed at blocking any serious struggle against the never-ending attacks on working conditions and the impact of austerity measures.

The reason for this is that Verdi supports the debt brake and considers it necessary. Verdi leader Bsirske is a Green Party member, and the union's national executive includes many Social Democrat, Green and Left Party members, all of which have supported the austerity policies implemented by governments at the federal and state level.

The attempt to suspend the right to strike with the new agreement cannot be tolerated. The basic right to strike takes priority over the collective bargaining commitment to labour peace.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the Verdi sellout is that workers must break decisively with the trade unions and organise themselves independently.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) proposes the formation of independent action committees to unite all of those in struggle who are not prepared to tolerate the dictates of a corrupt trade union that enjoys intimate ties with the government and state apparatus. This will be an important step towards taking control of the struggle against low wages and unbearable workloads, and initiating contact with workers in other countries to prepare a common fight.

Among some workers, the anger at Verdi is mixed with a degree of confusion, given that now would appear to be the ideal time for a "defensive organisation" against social spending cuts. Some are calling for a "better" and "more militant" trade union, and recall the fact that the ÖTV, Verdi's predecessor, organised an open-ended strike in the 1970s that involved 210,000 workers, and brought rubbish collection, public transport and other sectors to a complete standstill for days. In the end, the workers secured an 11 percent pay increase and a significant improvement in working conditions.

The major ÖTV strike in early 1974 did in fact demonstrate the social power possessed by the working class. It was part of a radicalisation of European workers, which began in May–June 1968 with the general strike in France. But even then, the ruling elite responded with vicious attacks, and the unions went into retreat. In the year after the strike, a conspiracy led to the bringing down of the SPD-led government of Willy Brandt, and the right-wing SPD politician Helmut Schmidt came to power. Schmidt appointed 15 trade union functionaries as ministers or state secretaries and imposed brutal spending cuts with the unions' complicity.

Twenty years later, ÖTV leader Monika Wulf-Mathies provoked widespread anger and mass resignations from the union after she capitulated following the most bitter strike to date, and agreed to a deal that amounted to a wage freeze. For this sellout, she received the post of an EU commissioner, and was subsequently an advisor to the government of Gerhard

Schröder, which imposed the Agenda 2010.

Verdi and the other unions have continuously shifted to the right ever since. Their transformation into agencies for management and instruments of the state apparatus is not only the result of the widespread corruption of top union officials, but has deep objective roots.

As long as the labour market and working conditions were to a large extent national in character, the unions were able to apply pressure to secure higher wages and social improvements. The globalisation of production resulted in the domination of unrestricted, global competition. The trade unions no longer apply pressure on management to secure improvements for workers, but blackmail workers into accepting wage reductions and social spending cuts in order to improve the competitive position of big business.

Every trade union that accepts the profit system and the nation state as providing the framework for their activities, and endorses the capitalist system, has been impacted by this development. This is why the building of action committees is directly bound up with the struggle against the unions' narrow-minded, nationalist policies, and aimed at establishing international cooperation and the coordination of global resistance.

The struggle against the terrible conditions in the education system and the never-ending attacks on public services must be understood as a political fight directed against the grand coalition's anti-refugee policies, social spending cuts and preparations for war.

It is impossible to prevent the systematic dismantling of the education system and social services without breaking the power of the banks and financial oligarchy. This is why the struggle against social spending cuts requires an internationalist and socialist programme.

This is the programme fought for by the SGP, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We support all genuine initiatives to break the unions' control and oppose its dictates, and organise a common struggle of all public sector workers. We are standing in the European elections to unite working class struggles internationally and arm them with a socialist perspective. Contact us to support our campaign!



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