

Germany: Public service workers up in arms against Verdi contract

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Journalists, politicians from all the main political parties and trade union representatives, whose lives are far removed from the concerns and problems of the majority of the working population, have spread the fairy tale that the contract deal reached last weekend represents a victory for public service workers. Those affected, however, are angry and outraged.

The deal, which has nothing in common with the union's original demand, will mean a reduction in real wages for most of Germany's 2.5 million municipal and federal public sector workers. Over a period of 28 months, salaries will increase in stages by just 3.2 percent.

The United Services Union (Verdi), which signed off on the deal, had the nerve to state in its press release that the new contract represented a "Significant increase for those on lower incomes and health care professionals."

None of the editors of Germany's major daily newspapers and online publications, radio and television stations sought to differ. They all reacted according to their respective political orientation.

"Expressed as a percentage, this represents a considerable increase for nursing staff," commented the Berlin-based daily newspaper *taz*. Spiegel Online wrote: "Despite the coronavirus crisis, the public service unions have negotiated a decent wage increase." The fact that nursing staff are receiving significantly more than others, they wrote, shows "that the system works."

Business-oriented media complained about the deal. "Corona special bonuses for administrative staff who had little to do in the spring while on full pay; disproportionate wage increases of up to 4.5 percent for low-skilled auxiliary staff," moaned the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In future, it would no longer be possible to claim that nursing staff "fail to earn any appreciation apart from clapping."

We have already commented elsewhere on the so-called "significant increase" for lower income groups—Verdi refers to a figure of 4.5 percent. Firstly, however, the increase is extremely small in view of the 28-month pay-out term. The original demand was 4.8 percent in 12 months. Secondly, it

only benefits those few workers who receive less than €2,000 gross monthly, i.e., around €11.40 gross per hour.

But the claim that nursing staff will receive a powerful boost to their incomes is also, on closer inspection, misleading. The truth is that only a few of the health professionals referred to by Verdi will profit from the 8.7 percent raise for nurses and up to 10 percent for intensive care workers.

Stefan Sell, Professor of Economics, Social Policy and Social Sciences at the University of Koblenz, drew attention to this fact in an article on his blog. Logically, he said, the deal only applies to nurses who fall under the collective bargaining umbrella of the public service (federal/local government). Following a wave of privatisations in past decades, however, only a small number of health staff are covered by this rule.

For example, the percentage of hospitals under public ownership (including those under the auspices of federal state and social security institutions that are not covered by the collective agreement) has fallen from 44.6 in 1992 to 28.7 in 2018. "More and more frequently, municipalities or even federal states (university hospitals) are selling their facilities to private, profit-making companies," Sell writes. "Their share has increased from 15.5 percent (1992) to 37.6 percent (2018), i.e., more than doubled."

The situation is even more serious in nursing care for the elderly. "Of the 14,480 nursing homes reported by nursing care statistics for the end of 2017, only 599 were still under municipal ownership, i.e., 4.1 percent of all nursing homes in Germany. Of the 14,050 outpatient nursing services, only 154 are still under municipal ownership.

"In this respect the direct effects of the collective agreement on 'the' nursing staff are manageable and more than limited," Sell continues. In any case, the impression that, by playing around with figures such as "10 percent more," the financial situation for "the" nursing staff in Germany is now finally improving significantly, has to be corrected.

In short: The contract being celebrated by Verdi is a sell-

out and just window dressing. The deal only applies to an extremely small section of workers, who allegedly “clearly” benefit. And the “compromises” that other occupational groups had to accept so that “nursing care” will allegedly get the recognition it deserves turns out, on closer inspection, to be a wage cut. The minimal pay increases for a few have been bought at the expense of real wage cuts for the vast majority. No wonder the public employers’ side is satisfied.

Those affected by the deal have seen through this charade. One nurse tweeted: “Unfortunately, Verdi has left all the people in rescue services and staff in kindergartens in the lurch. This result cannot be called a success. To postpone the adjustment of incomes in West and East Germany once again for another two years is a slap in the face for everyone who went on strike.”

For his part, Daniel Merbitz, head of collective bargaining at the German Trade Union for Education and Science (GEW), which organises not only teachers but also many kindergarten teachers, rejoiced: “This is a respectable result in these difficult corona times.”

The answer from workers on Facebook was not long in coming, with one writing: “As always, the labour dispute was broken off and 80 percent of demands not met. All the little extras are presented once again as a success. In fact, we lose out. Even for nursing staff ... it doesn’t even cover rising costs. It’s sad. The one-off payments are ridiculous. This deal belongs in the garbage can.”

In particular, all the praise surrounding the allegedly juicy coronavirus premium, a single payment of between €300 and €600 per wage group has drawn a hail of criticism: “Juicy premium! Dude! Can we get it monthly,” asks a GEW member. “You’ve got to be crazy! No wonder nobody joins trade unions. Poor negotiation results are one thing, but to reinterpret them positively is complete bullshit!”

Dominik tweets: “Unbelievable! This is a slap in the face. 50 euros more per month, how much do I have left? Nurses should start to wake up and fight back, go out on the streets and strike!”

Bus drivers who were also involved in the labour dispute, but who are treated completely separately by Verdi, expressed their discontent with the alleged “Corona bonus”: “The biggest affront is this 600 euro bonus,” writes one driver. “They can pay out 1,500 euros tax-free and then give us a ridiculous 600 euros that not everyone will receive. I am very disappointed in Verdi.”

Josip tweeted to Verdi: “Thank you very much for your efforts. My resignation is in the post. I can do better things with the membership fees.”

Another commented: “Celebrating this pathetic deal clearly shows that you have served your time as a union. I

can only advise every Verdi member to resign from the union. Above all the timeline of the contract is a slap in the face for workers.”

This mood against Verdi is widespread in social media groups. “I will draft a letter of resignation this week,” writes one user. “Verdi is history for me,” another one writes,” adding, “Everyone should resign immediately, it’s a slap in the face for the membership.”

Another commentator echoes: “Everyone should leave the union. Maybe then they will return to their senses.”

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* welcome the rebellion against Verdi and its sell-out of the wage struggle in the public service, but the energy expressed in the current rage and spirit of rebellion must be directed in the right direction. Verdi will not “return to its senses.”

Like all other trade unions, Verdi is not an organisation that in principle represents the interests of the workers, but somehow fails to do so due to its corrupt and cowardly functionaries. Rather, it is unreservedly committed to the defence of capitalism and defence of the profits of the rich.

The caste of trade union functionaries, which socially stand miles apart from most union members, pursues political goals that benefit themselves and the class they represent. The union bureaucracy is much closer to the ruling class politically and socially than to the workers they supposedly represent, and they are all members of the same political parties.

The former long-time head of Verdi is a member of the Green Party, and his successor, Frank Werneke, is a member of the Social Democratic Party. They negotiate with fellow party members in public service. The chief negotiator for the public employers’ side, the mayor of Lüneburg, Ulrich Mädge, has been a Social Democrat and Verdi member for many decades. Verdi shares the standpoint of the ruling class that workers have to pay for the billions handed out previously to the banks and big business. The current deal is eloquent testimony to this fact.

It is therefore urgently necessary to organise independently of Verdi. There is no other way to represent the interests of workers in the public sector and beyond. Do contact us today!



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