

Germany: The three-week strike at Teigwaren Riesa and the dead end of the union perspective

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Last week, the German union Gewerkschaft Nahrung Genuss Gastätten (NGG) ended a three-week strike at the industrial bakery Teigwaren Riesa by concluding a collective agreement with the company. The roughly 150 employees at the East German market leader for pasta demonstrated great willingness to fight for better wages, which are currently just above the legal minimum.

But the agreement negotiated by the NGG is not the victory for the employees that it proclaims. “Happy end for Riesa Nudeln, the conveyor belts are running again!” was the headline of the NGG’s announcement about the agreement. Really only the owners, the Freidler family, is “happy” that the belts are again running.

A closer look at the deal reveals what a “happy end” it is for employees. The NGG agreed to a gradual increase in hourly wages over the next seven months of one single euro. This will increase the monthly wage of a full-time worker by €173, according to the NGG. In the lowest pay group, wages would rise by 10.1 percent; in packaging, where most employees work, the percentage increase would be 8.7 percent, and for plant operators, 7.6 percent. The collective agreement runs for one year until August 31, 2022.

But the wages cited by the NGG are poverty wages, which will now be increased only minimally. In seven months’ time, workers at the low end of the pay scale will still gross (i.e., pay *before* taxes) less than €1,900 monthly for a 40-hour work week. They previously received only €9.94 per hour, just 34 cents above the national minimum wage. By the end of the year their hourly wage will rise by one euro to €10.94. In about the same time, the minimum wage will rise by 8.9 percent to €10.45. So the gap between the minimum wage and their pay will no longer be 34 cents, but 49 cents!

Even for the slightly better paid employees, the increases are less gratifying after a second glance. Most employees will gross about €2,160 per month next year, and drivers for the plant about €2,450. Even these wages hover around the

official low-wage threshold.

The rising inflation rate, currently 3.9 percent, eats up a lot of the raise. Considering that families with such low incomes are forced to spend most of their money on rent and food, where price increases of 4.5 to 5 percent recently outstripped the inflation rate, the actual wage increase amounts to still less.

Far from closing the wage gap with the west of Germany, the newly negotiated contract locks in the low-wage regime.

More than 30 years after the annexation of East Germany and the restoration of capitalist property relations, the people of the eastern city of Riesa earn on average about €700 less per month than the workers at the headquarters in Trochtelfingen in the western state of Baden-Württemberg. In 1993, the small “family business” Alb-Gold Teigwaren took over the Riesa plant from the Treuhand, the commission responsible for the integration of East German industry into West Germany. In just a few years, it became the market leader in eastern Germany with Riesa pasta and, with an annual production of over 20,000 tons, the second-largest pasta producer in Germany.

The company accomplished this by paying wages which were below even the depressed East German level. Workers in Riesa, for example, grossed a maximum of €11.50 an hour in 2018. For many employees, this implies a retirement in poverty, despite decades of working in rolling shifts. The proprietor family Freidler, on the other hand, raked in annual profits in the millions. In 2019, the company announced return on investment of 7.7 percent. In the same year, workers decided they had had enough and began to put up resistance.

The Riesa workforce was ready to fight for wages equal to the West German level and turned to the NGG. Ninety-five percent of the employees participated in the election of the first works council, and the number of union members grew from 4 to 123 within a year.

But in turning to the NGG, the Riesa workers donned the

union straitjacket. The workforce's great willingness to fight resulted in five 24-hour strikes and two half-day strikes before management agreed in May 2019 to incrementally adopt a collective bargaining agreement, as well as the extant Saxony collective agreement on overtime, by the end of 2020.

Works council head Frank Meyer and the NGG sold this struggle as a great success. In reality, the low wages were already enshrined in the NGG's Saxony collective agreement. The NGG received support from the German Left Party and the DGB, the German trade union confederation. The latter even awarded the Riesa works council the Saxony co-determination prize at the beginning of this year.

By then, this first fight by the Riesa workers had already been sold out. The measly increases to €11.80 beginning January 2019 and a further 4 percent at the beginning of this year were rosily presented as a "first step in the right direction."

However, by adopting the collective wage agreement, the NGG had de facto reimposed the worse working conditions in the East. Instead of harnessing the willingness of employees to strike and demanding an adjustment to the wages in the West, the works council and NGG demoralized the workforce with their tried-and-true tactics and sanctioned starvation wages, barely above the legal minimum, for another two years.

The NGG applied this approach to the current dispute. The first 16-hour strike at the end of July was shut down despite there being no offer from management. Negotiations continued.

This was followed in August by weekly 24-hour strikes. After initially offering only a one-off payment, at the beginning of September the management offered the incremental increase reaching one euro, with the collective agreement running until March 31, 2023. Confronted with the workers' continued willingness to fight, the NGG was forced to reject the brazen offer for a real wage reduction and to demand a further 50 cent increase for 2022. Considering that the statutory minimum wage will rise by 85 cents by July 2022, this can only be described as cheating the workforce.

But barely a week later, the NGG agreed to the now similarly lousy result, but this time touted it as a great success.

The strike at Teigwaren Riesa highlights certain basic developments.

The willingness of workers to fight shows the enormous social anger that has accumulated 30 years after the restoration of capitalist conditions, turning East Germany into a provider of cheap labor. As the NGG itself points out,

the willingness to fight at Riesa is just one example among many. During the negotiations at the Cargill oil plant in Riesa, the Frosta frozen food plant in Lommatzsch, the Sonnländer fruit juice producer in Rötha and other companies, the onus was on low wages in the East. In all these companies there existed a great readiness to engage in labor struggles.

Low wages in the German east were a focus of the collective bargaining negotiations concluded by the IG Metall union in July and are a topic in the ongoing negotiations by the Verdi union for the retail sector in the states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. The unions actively work to isolate each of these struggles against poor working conditions and low wages in the East from one another, as well as from the struggles in West Germany and internationally. Thus, the unions are attempting to sell out the labor struggles, one by one.

The current wave of strikes in East Germany coincides with an international return of class struggle. Thirty years after the end of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the supposed "historic victory of capitalism," the reality of life has become unbearable for billions of workers. The coronavirus pandemic has dramatically exacerbated this development. While the financial oligarchy increases its fortunes in tandem with the rising death toll, billions of people are at the mercy of death, disease and the social consequences of the pandemic.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has therefore launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite and coordinate these struggles and launch a global working-class counter-offensive. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress any expression of resistance. Therefore, action committees independent of the unions must be built in every factory and plant.

We also call on the workers at Teigwaren Riesa to build such an action committee independent of the NGG to force the equalization of wages in the East and West. They have shown great willingness and courage to fight, but must now take the next step. The *World Socialist WebSite* and the Socialist Equality Party will support them to the best of our ability. Contact us here.



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