

Germany's federal election and the intensification of class struggle

Ulrich Rippert
23 September 2021

The run up to Germany's federal election this coming Sunday has been characterised by an unprecedented wave of strikes, protests and demonstrations.

German rail workers have been on strike on three occasions since August, paralysing freight and passenger traffic for days. Then, last week, the train drivers' union (GDL) abruptly ended the nationwide strike, although the strikers' militancy had increased and the rail management had made only minimal concessions.

The union accepted a drastic reduction in real wages. The agreed increase of 1.8 percent on average over a period of 32 months fails to even compensate for half of the current rate of inflation, which is rapidly approaching 4 percent. The GDL also agreed to the introduction of a two-tier system in the company pension scheme. The previous paid supplementary pension will only apply to so-called existing employees from next year.

The German public service union Verdi is trying this week to end the indefinite strike by staff at the two major hospital concerns in Berlin, Charité and Vivantes. At Vivantes' subsidiary firms, where the main issue is bringing the extremely low wages into line with the general contract for the public service, Verdi ended its strike last Saturday and resumed negotiations.

Verdi is strangling the strike in Berlin because the union is alarmed at the growing mobilisation of nursing staff, which is spreading like wildfire. The industrial action at the two state-owned hospital corporations is seen by many other workers as a signal to finally take action against the intolerable working conditions prevailing in the health sector. These conditions are the consequence of years of cutbacks, privatisation measures and the orientation to profit making, and have significantly worsened in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time that Verdi is desperately seeking to end the strike in the health sector, it has been forced to call a nationwide short term "warning" strike at IKEA.

The Swedish furniture company employs over 18,000 workers in Germany. Average company wage levels are very low and staff have struggled in recent months with additional workloads due to digitalisation and growing online trade.

The situation is even more acute in the engineering and electrical industry. Last week, IG Metall agreed to cut 2,600 jobs at Siemens Energy. There were protest rallies and demonstrations at all of the affected sites, where Siemens workers made clear their readiness to fight. But IG Metall and its associated works councils have never had the intention of waging a serious struggle to defend the jobs.

This is the situation everywhere. Half a million jobs are down to be axed in the German auto industry alone. The ruling class is using the pandemic to reverse all of the working class's social gains. Under conditions where workers are losing their incomes, livelihood or even their lives, the ruling elite is using the pandemic for a new round of enrichment.

Last week in Saarlouis, more than 3,000 Ford workers demonstrated together with their families against job cuts. The factory, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year with great pomp, is on the brink of collapse. Of the factory's more than 7,000 employees, over 2,000 have already been laid off by management in close cooperation with the local works council and IG Metall.

Many people in the region, where the mining and steel industries were shut down many years ago, are angry and deeply concerned. Ford is the largest employer in the region, and thousands of jobs in the auto supply industry and other sectors of the economy are also in danger. Some 14,000 signatures in defence of the plant have been collected in recent months. But Ford management continues to keep its closure plans secret, while IG Metall refuses to lead a joint struggle of all auto workers at all plants to defend jobs.

The same situation prevails at the companies Daimler, Audi, Bosch, BMW and Volkswagen. Daimler announced last autumn that it would double its worldwide job cuts from 15,000 to 30,000. In the summer, workers at auto parts manufacturer Continental fought against the threat of job cuts with a series of protests after management increased its plans for job cuts to 30,000, with 13,000 to go in Germany.

Resistance is developing worldwide. Of particular significance was the industrial action at the American Volvo Trucks in Dublin, Virginia, the fourth largest truck manufacturer in the world. Three thousand workers went on strike for five weeks this summer to oppose a contract deal that significantly worsened their working conditions and wages. On three separate occasions they voted down by a large majority a contract agreed by IG Metall's American sister organisation, the UAW.

In Belgium, Volvo Cars workers also opposed an agreement between the company and the union to extend the working week. In June, workers at the British pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline went on strike for 11 days to oppose the dismissal of temporary workers and cuts to social benefits.

In Turkey, thousands of electricity workers took spontaneous strike action to protest worsened working conditions agreed by the Tes-Is union. In Canada, miners at Vale in Sudbury, Ontario, went on strike for two months after rejecting a union-backed contract which down-scaled workers.

This development of the class struggle has implications for the election campaign in Germany. All of the country's parliamentary parties are responding to growing resistance from workers by closing ranks and forming a common front. They all supported the so-called Corona bailouts last year, which handed out hundreds of billions to corporations and the super-rich. Now they are all in favour of squeezing those billions back out of the working class through social cuts, austerity measures, debt brakes, etc. At the same time, the military budget is being further increased.

A key role in this all-party front against the working class is played by the trade unions. They are trying to prove to the corporations and the government that they are best placed and have the best plans for defending big business interests in the global struggle for market share and profits. They want to convince executives that profits and share prices will rise faster if they work closely with the unions.

In doing so, they are using their extensive apparatus of

functionaries, including works councils and shop stewards, to suppress any serious struggle to defend jobs, wages and social standards. This strategy includes phoney protests that only serve to spread frustration, and local based campaigns that divide and pit workers against one other. The unions, however, are less and less able to control and suppress the growing resistance in factories.

In this situation, the election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) assumes great political importance. The SGP has actively intervened in the strikes and protests and fought to build independent action committees. In doing so, we have always stressed that these struggles are part of a growing international mobilisation of the working class.

All over the world, workers are facing the same multinationals and financial interests. That is why they cannot allow themselves to be divided. They can only defend their rights and gains if they coordinate their struggles internationally. This requires a break with the trade unions and the building of the International Workers Alliance of Action Committees (IWA-RFC).

At the same time, we have stated that workers need their own party to develop and provide political leadership for their struggles. The SGP is the only party that bases itself on an international, socialist programme to give the working class a clear and principled perspective in the present and coming struggles with corporations, government and unions.

We advocate a socialist programme that places the needs of the working people before the capitalist policy of maximising profits and unrestrained enrichment—a policy, which permeates all pores of society and is defended by all Bundestag parties and trade unions.

The SGP's election appeal states: "No social problem can be resolved without expropriating the banks and major corporations and placing them under the democratic control of the working class. Their profits and wealth must be confiscated and the trillions given to them over the past year must be returned. The world economy must be restructured on the basis of a scientific and rational plan."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact