

German public sector workers hold initial “warning” strike in contract negotiations

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On October 27, several hundred public sector workers took to the streets in Hamburg in a number of rallies and protests. The employees from state enterprises, universities, schools, university clinics, social services and other sectors are ready to fight for better working conditions and more money following more than 18 months of the coronavirus pandemic, but the public service unions are already preparing a sellout.

The current round of contract bargaining affects about 1.1 million pay-scale employees nationwide. In addition, there are about 1.4 million civil servants and one million pensioners to whom the agreement is to be applied.

The contract bargaining started on October 8 with a first meeting of official negotiators from Germany’s 16 states (Tarifgemeinschaft der Länder, TdL), chaired by Reinhold Hilbers (Christian Democratic Union), and involving the trade unions Verdi (public service), GEW (teachers), IG BAU (building workers) and GdP (police trade union). “Objective and friendly in tone but far apart in substance,” was how Verdi Chairman Frank Werneke summed up the meeting.

The talks will continue on October 30-31 in Potsdam. The October 27 one-day “warning” strike in the Hanseatic city was meant to apply some pressure after the representatives of the state governments arrogantly rejected the unions’ demands in the first round.

Hilbers, Lower Saxony’s finance minister in the state grand coalition (CDU and SPD) led by Stefan Weill (SPD), stated that the unions’ demands were “illusory” and referred, among other things, to the costs arising from the pandemic.

“We are striving for a quick consolidation of the budget without new debt,” Hilbers told the media at the start of negotiations. “With personnel costs averaging 45 percent of the budget volume, this sector will have

to contribute a notable amount.”

According to Verdi, Hilbers even threatened that state governments would respond with staff cuts to any deal that, in their view, exceeded their financial capacity.

This means that teachers, nurses, social workers and educators who have been in the frontline during the pandemic are now expected to pay for it by accepting wage cuts and giving up any hope of improving their working conditions.

He argued against compensating workers for price increases in the current and coming years, which he put at 2.1 and 1.9 percent. In fact, inflation is soaring in Germany and is currently at 4.1 percent. This indicates that state governments are planning massive real wage cuts and job cuts instead of hiring the tens of thousands of new workers necessary to fill vacant posts in schools, universities, clinics and government offices.

Even in the health care sector, Hilbers sees no need for action. According to Verdi, he boasted that improvements had been agreed to for this sector in the 2019 contract bargaining round. The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique one-time burden that did not justify a permanent increase in wages. A shortage of skilled workers in the public sector was “only noticeable in a few areas and affects all employers equally,” Verdi cited Hilbers. “More money would not help there either.”

Verdi and the GEW have bitterly complained about these statements by Hilbers, but basically they are on his side. Throughout the pandemic, the trade unions have done nothing to ensure the safety of workers in clinics, factories, public authorities and teachers, children and young people in schools. Only recently Verdi sold out the strike by health care workers at the Berlin Charité Hospital and the Vivantes Hospital group.

The GEW teachers union continues to maintain its demand that schools remain open, even though infections are skyrocketing, especially in schools, due to the criminal policy of Germany's state governments. In some districts of Thuringia and Bavaria, the incidence figures among pupils totals over 1,000. Thuringia, which is governed by the Left Party, and Bavaria, which is governed by the Christian Social Union, have abolished all health protection measures in schools that are crowded and often poorly ventilated, including compulsory mask wearing and, in Thuringia, the regular testing of pupils.

This infestation of schools is criminal in view of studies describing the long-term effects of COVID-19 on children. The health and lives of the weakest layers of society are being deliberately sacrificed to the requirements of the economy and finance.

The GEW does not contest this. Its Chairperson Maike Finner has been arguing for months for the retention of open schools. Last month she warned of renewed school and day care closures this autumn and winter. "Already, entire classes are quarantined in some cases," she lamented to *Business Insider*.

Now she considers schools better equipped for the upcoming autumn than last year. The vaccination rate among school employees is extraordinarily high, she told the Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschlands (RND). The health of children appears to be secondary. "If the prevention route is continued consistently, schools can remain open," she said.

The unions have so far made sure that workers bear the consequences of the murderous contagion policy—at workplaces and personally, through infection, illness and death. Now they are also trying to ensure that workers stump up for these policies.

The unions are demanding 5 percent over 12 months, or at least 150 euros a month, and at least 300 euros in the health care sector, plus 100 euros per month more for all trainees. A contract agreement for student assistants is on the list of demands. The GEW has also once again called for equal pay for salaried and civil servant teachers. The working conditions of employees in road maintenance and road construction are also part of the negotiations.

The representatives of German states have responded that the contract will be limited solely to the issue of salaries.

A review of the last round of contract bargaining almost three years ago is instructive. At that time, the unions had demanded a 6 percent increase over a 12-month period but at least 200 euros per month. They then agreed to a contract with a term of 33 months and salary increases averaging less than 3 percent per year. Alleged "structural improvements" were clawed back by cuts elsewhere, such as Christmas bonuses. This time around the demands are lower, inflation is higher and the breaking point for workers has long since passed.

Verdi, GEW, IG BAU, GdP and civil servants organisations are doing all they can to offload the costs of the COVID-19 pandemic onto workers. The latter can therefore only realise their thoroughly justified demands if they begin to organise independently of the trade unions.

A first step must be the formation of action committees to take industrial action into their own hands and discuss measures, in particular, extending the industrial action to other sections of the working class in the public sector and beyond. Teachers, care workers, educators, social workers and all workers who agree that they are no longer being represented by Verdi, GEW and Co. should contact the WSWS.



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