

More protest strikes in Germany's public sector

Our reporters

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Several thousand German public sector employees have once again stopped work this week, shortly before a third round of contract negotiations scheduled for this weekend in Potsdam. For 20 months, nurses, educators and other public sector employees have kept life going despite the coronavirus pandemic, and they are ready to take up a fight for better, safer working conditions. However, the unions are in the process of selling out this struggle.

In the midst of the explosive fourth coronavirus wave, state finance ministers are determined to relieve the burden on state coffers due to pandemic-related debt at the expense of workers. To date, the employers association representing the federal states (TdL) has not responded to union demands for a 5 percent wage increase, with a minimum of 150 euros (300 euros in nursing services). The lead negotiators, Lower Saxony's Finance Minister Reinhold Hilbers (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Hamburg's Finance Senator Andreas Dressel (Social Democratic Party, SPD), had still not presented an offer three days before the third round of negotiations begins.

The new "traffic light" coalition government of the SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens has made clear it will continue and even intensify the murderous "profits before lives" campaign. More than 100,000 patients have died of COVID-19 in Germany so far, but the "traffic light" government has ended the designation of an "epidemic emergency of national scope." It has decided against relaxing the debt ceiling and higher taxes for the rich and also wants to allocate many billions to the Bundeswehr (armed forces). This leaves not a cent for public service personnel, let alone for funding measures to address COVID-19.

Against this aggressive government policy, it is not possible to rely on the trade unions, like the public service union Verdi or the educators union GEW, whose functionaries themselves belong to the "traffic light" parties. They will not lead the necessary fight against the state governments. To do so, public sector workers and employees must build independent rank-and-file committees that link up with other sectors of the economy and the international working class on a socialist basis.

Neither Verdi, GEW, the civil servants union dbb nor the construction union IG Bau will make a principled defence of workers' interests. They conduct collective bargaining to allow workers to "blow off steam" and divert social resistance. This has been demonstrated again in all the recent protest strikes and actions.

In **Düsseldorf**, in front of several thousand strikers who had gathered before the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament, Verdi boss Frank Werneke promised, "We will not accept a coronavirus emergency agreement!" With that, he simultaneously revealed what

has long been talked about behind closed doors: a "coronavirus emergency agreement."

Werneke told the press that there would only be an agreement "if health care personnel receive tangible financial improvements." Even this wording smells suspiciously like a sell-out. What are "tangible financial improvements"? The demanded 5 percent wage increase would be a real wage reduction in view of inflation of nearly 6 percent. The minimum amount of 300 euros per month more for nursing staff has been rejected by the heads of the federal states from the outset as "unrealistic." Nevertheless, Reinhold Hilbers, chief negotiator for the employers' side, told finance daily *Handelsblatt* that he saw "the will on both sides to reach an agreement."

In **Berlin**, the unions practiced the method "Trotta, cavallino" (Trot, trot, little horsey). They had their members canter for over three kilometres through the Tiergarten, with loudspeaker announcements of the wage demands audible only to the demonstrators themselves, except for a few frightened birds and squirrels. It was clear to every striker that the union's demand for a 5 percent wage increase—if it were met, which it will not—would not even cover current inflation.

A group of day care teachers talked about their experiences with the GEW's collective bargaining policy. "The previous collective agreement was a joke," said Katrin. "With the three-year term, we were demobilized, and the wage increase was hardly compensation for the price increases." Her colleague Stefanie added, "Considering today's inflation rate of about 5 percent, we should actually start with a demand of 15 percent so that we have real room to negotiate."

Julia explained, "The Verdi negotiators are friends with the parties in the Senate (federal executive) through their party contacts. There can be no hard negotiations. And they then praise themselves for the agreement they have reached. At the last wage settlement, they said it was the 'best possible deal,' but if you look, it's not a good deal at all. Christmas bonuses were frozen, they weren't increased, they were decreased."

And Melanie added, "The last deal of 8 percent was spread out over three years. So it melts between your fingers. But the media sold it as a big wage increase."

In addition to educators and social service workers, the 2,000 or so participants in Berlin included forestry workers, librarians and employees of various district offices. Daniel, a forestry worker from Brandenburg, who came to Berlin with the IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt (IG Bau) union, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I think the demand of 5 percent is much too low, given the inflation rate. We also need much stronger strikes and at the same time in all cities."

Christian, who works in a library, said, "We definitely need more staff. All colleagues are overworked, especially under coronavirus

conditions, where there are always different regulations.” He acknowledged that in recent years Verdi has “always accepted neo-liberal policies as well.” He described Verdi’s representation of workers’ interests as “rather mediocre” and did not rule out the idea of building new independent organizations. So far, he had refrained from doing so because he feared that this would “tie up an incredible amount of resources.”

Michael reported on the antediluvian equipment in public sector offices. “We work in the district office with digital equipment that corresponds to the early 1990s. No proper printing technology, PCs or telephone system.” He said this was all very stressful in the daily work and was also reflected in the average amount of sick leave. “In the district office, employees have an average of 45 sick days per year!”

During the pandemic, he said, it took a very long time for the employer to create the option for working from home. “It wasn’t until March this year that we were provided with digital devices, so we can work from home, at least a little bit in a rudimentary way.” His colleague Stefan added, “I’ve only had the opportunity to work from home for a few days.”

Alexander, who works in the mail room of the tax office, criticized Verdi’s demands, saying, “I would rather be in favour of a wage increase with a fixed amount that would bring a real improvement to the lower wage groups. Because 5 percent of a small basic wage also remains small. The wage gap should not be so wide. And we’re not even talking about the vast sums that managers are pocketing today. Actually, we should be making higher demands than the 5 percent.”

Melanie, a preschool teacher in Berlin-Kreuzberg, criticized the unions for doing nothing when her school was downgraded two years ago. “We used to be listed as a hot spot school, and two years ago we were downgraded. With that, our pay grades were also downgraded, and teachers received less pay.”

She had written to complain to Verdi and the GEW, to which she belongs, but, “The unions did nothing. Nothing has changed for the better regarding our problems since then. We are still a hot spot, but now we are expected to do our work with fewer staff. Now, for example, about 30 percent of our staff is on sick leave—as a result, I have to take on extra hours without getting paid!”

Melanie criticized the unions, “Yesterday, the GEW went on strike and today Verdi. This is a policy of divide-and-rule under conditions where we urgently need to join forces.”

New protest strikes have also been taking place in the **Ruhr** region for weeks. The unions are doing everything they can to let the workers’ anger fizzle out in isolated, small token actions.

A few days ago, a report was received about the GEW’s warning strike on November 18. The GEW had called educators in Essen, Düsseldorf, Hagen and Duisburg to take action. The Duisburg-Rheinhausen strike meeting took place in a closed suburban school yard that could not be seen from the outside, giving the completely false impression that the strikers were isolated from the rest of society. As usual, the majority of teachers with civil servant status were excluded from the strike—and thus practically also from participating in the meeting.

Unnoticed by the Duisburg public, a maximum of 150 strikers took part in this district of about 1 million inhabitants and thousands of educators. Just two schools remained completely closed.

On the same day that COVID-19 infections reached a new record of nearly 65,000 nationwide, GEW spokespersons, including “wages expert” Gabi Wegener, did not raise a single concrete demand

regarding the coronavirus pandemic. The chairwoman of the Lower Rhine region of the DGB union confederation, Angelika Wagner, praised some unions that were on strike, especially the police union, and at the same time forgot to mention the struggle of the nursing staff at the university hospitals.

The strikers’ dissatisfaction with such a policy of tokenism was palpable. Several participants at the rally angrily pointed out in conversation that the North Rhine-Westphalia state government is insisting on dispensing with mask-wearing altogether at schools. This, they said, was a slap in the face to educators, who had taken a great many quite committed coronavirus protection measures and was “really concerning,” according to a special education teacher.

A nurse and socio-educational professional also called the decision “completely irresponsible.” She reported that mask-wearing had not been taken seriously in schools and that students’ masks were simply not up to the constant putting on and taking off during the day between rooms and the courtyard, so that the fastenings would tear and protection would be lost, while incidences of infection among elementary school students were rising to astronomical levels.

One teacher reported class sizes of 27 to 32 children crammed into one room together. “It doesn’t make me feel very safe.” Teachers were being “let down.”

Against the backdrop of the Long COVID danger to teachers and students, an older elementary school teacher pointed out that salaried educators—unlike their civil servant colleagues—can expect only reduced sick pay and no salary payments after a few months of illness, which she described as an “insane injustice.” She also reported that the air filters at her elementary school, which had been promised for months, had been delivered but not installed because the city had not supplied the appropriate brackets for them.

Several educators acknowledged that their poor overall financial and medical security have led to a major teacher shortage. For example, “at the lower end” of the contracts, native language instruction for immigrants has been given for many years by workers on temporary contracts, they said. “However, they are covered by a municipal collective bargaining agreement, and there is no call for a strike here at all.” This is another example of how the GEW also divides the workforce in its collective bargaining rounds, demobilizes them and lets their struggles come to nothing.



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