

Nursing staff in Germany on strike during contract negotiations for public sector workers

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Nurses, educators and other public employees are currently protesting and striking for better wages and working conditions throughout Germany.

Nursing staff at Germany's university hospitals, which are directly subordinate to the country's state governments, took strike action on Tuesday and Wednesday last week. The strike took place during negotiations for a new contract for public services workers. Nursing staff are among those who have made the biggest sacrifices during the twenty months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the university hospitals of Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Essen, Cologne and Münster were hit by the strikes, and in Bavaria, clinics in Munich, Augsburg, Erlangen, Regensburg and Würzburg. In Berlin, mainly nursery school teachers and district council workers were on strike. Workers in all spheres of state-run enterprises, including hospitals, nursing homes, day-care centres, schools, universities and social welfare centres, are affected by the contract dispute.

"Halloween is over—here the HORROR continues," strikers at Bonn University Hospital sarcastically painted on their banner. The pandemic in particular has intensified this horror in the last two years. According to WHO estimates, up to 180,000 nurses worldwide have died from COVID-19. The number who have died in Germany is difficult to determine, with the figures kept carefully hidden from the public.

"When the Corona pandemic started, I thought: this is the big bang now we all need to finally ensure we are heard," nurse Lisa Schlagheck, 29, declared in a WDR media interview. "But at the end of the day, nothing has changed. Many of my colleagues are quitting one after the other because they simply can't go on anymore."

There is now a shortage of at least 100,000 nurses in German hospitals, and more and more nurses are suffering burn-out—under conditions where infection rates are exploding. Last week alone, five out of 100,000 of the

population were hospitalised with COVID-19. More than 3,000 coronavirus patients are currently in intensive care units.

At the same time, state leaders and their finance ministers are determined to step up pressure on nursing staff. Highly indebted state coffers are to be relieved at the expense of workforces. Following a second round of negotiations on 1 and 2 November, the organisation of state employers (Tarifgemeinschaft der Länder, TdL) has still not presented an offer.

Leading the negotiations are Reinhold Hilbers (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Finance Minister of Lower Saxony, and Andreas Dressel (Social Democratic Party, SPD), Finance Senator of Hamburg. Hilbers told the business daily *Handelsblatt* that the states want to "quickly return to balanced budgets without debt" and that this will only succeed "with structural savings."

"Personnel costs, which account for 40 to 50 percent of our total costs, must take a share of the burden," Hilbers declared.

State governments also know that the incoming new federal government is intent on intensifying the policies of the outgoing grand coalition (CDU/CSU plus SPD). In the midst of the country's devastating fourth COVID-19 wave, the "traffic light" coalition of SPD, Free Democratic Party and Greens ended the "epidemic emergency of national scope" on November 25. The coalition has also spoken out against relaxing the existing "debt brake" and against higher taxes for the rich. In addition, the new government wants to provide more money for the German army, even exceeding NATO's demand of two percent of GDP.

Meanwhile, for public service staff—whether they are regarded as "essential" or not—nothing is left. Workers in hospitals and intensive care units, retirement and nursing homes, day-care centres, schools, psychiatric wards and other institutions are expected to continue to slave away until the point of exhaustion. They confront further staff cuts

and a massive reduction in real wages with inflation already at 5 percent and rising.

Workers therefore have every right to take up the fight against these inhumane policies. A great deal depends on the current wage struggle. Nationwide, 1.1 million state employees, including 850,000 full-time posts, are affected. In addition, there are 1.4 million civil servants and one million pensioners whose salaries and pensions are based on the TdL. The TdL also sets the parameter for the TVöD (Public service workers contract), which regulates wages and conditions in federal and municipal public services and is renegotiated one year after the TdL.

The contract struggle is doomed to failure, however, if it is left in the hands of Verdi, the main public service union, and the other unions involved. All of the unions support the government's profits-before-lives politics, and they all conduct contract bargaining as a well-rehearsed ritual aimed above all at preventing any real struggle by the working class.

Neither Verdi and the German Civil Servants Federation (dbb), who are leading the negotiations in Potsdam, nor the GEW (teachers union), IG BAU (building workers) or the GdP (police union), which are all involved in the negotiations, question the government's austerity policies. On the contrary, they are implementing them every day in practice in workplaces. Only two months ago, Verdi called off month-long strikes at the Berlin state hospitals Charité and Vivantes.

The Verdi national executive is closely linked via SPD and Green politicians to German business circles and the incoming "traffic light" government. Frank Werneke (SPD), the head of Verdi, was proposed a few days ago for the supervisory board of Deutsche Bank, as successor to Frank Bsirske, the former head of Verdi. The latter is leaving Deutsche Bank to take up a mandate for the Greens in the German parliament.

In an interview with Deutschlandfunk, Werneke described the federal government's pandemic handouts to banks and corporations as "important and necessary." In the same interview, he made it clear that the wage demands made by the union had no real content. Verdi had set them as a "signal," Werneke said: "Let's see if the employers then cross this bridge."

GEW chair Maike Finnern has been pleading for months for schools to be kept open, no matter how high infection rates rise. Leading politicians at the forefront of the campaign for opening up schools are prominent Verdi members. They include Sandra Scheeres (SPD), education senator in Berlin, and Britta Ernst, education minister in Brandenburg, wife of the designated chancellor Olaf Scholz and president of the Conference of Education Ministers.

Neither politician has been challenged by the Verdi national executive for their policies, let alone expelled from the union.

The decision made 16 years ago to divide public sector workers into different bargaining rounds with a host of different contracts has only served to divide the working class. Each sector is conducting its own contract bargaining round for its own contract agreement with its own isolated and demoralising "warning strikes," armed with whistles provided free of charge by the union. Hospital staff are fighting separately from home care workers, airport workers separately from bus and tram drivers, and separately from postal delivery workers, train drivers or refuse collection workers. Yet they are all organised in Verdi—an ingenious system of divide and rule!

This alone shows that the unions are leading workers around by the nose. Officially, the unions are demanding a 5 percent wage increase for 12 months, or at least an extra 150 euros a month—in the health sector at least an extra 300 euros. In addition, the union is requesting a miserly increase of 100 euros per month for apprentices, while student assistants are to receive their own contract.

Three years ago, when their demands were somewhat higher at 6 percent, the same union officials ended up agreeing to a contract with a duration of 33 months. Salary increases then averaged less than 3 percent per year and working conditions during the pandemic have deteriorated massively since then.

The fact is that Verdi, GEW, IG Bau and dbb have so far ensured that public workers bear the consequences of the murderous contagion policy, both on the job, through increased workloads and wage dumping, and personally, through infection, illness and death. If these highly paid bureaucrats are allowed to continue, they will now saddle workers with the costs arising from the official COVID-19 policy.

It is time public sector workers begin to organise independently of the unions. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) calls for independent rank-and-file action committees, corresponding to those set up in Germany by teachers and bus drivers, and internationally by auto workers and health workers. These action committees will unite the working class into a united and international mass movement aimed at abolishing the capitalist profit system.



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