Berlin primary school teacher describes new contract as “simply ridiculous!”

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The new contract agreed by Germany’s federal states is a slap in the face for nurses, teachers and other public sector employees. It makes clear what politicians and union officials think of them. In the midst of the pandemic, they must not only risk their health and lives, but also pay for the “profits before lives” policy with their wages and conditions.

“Schools have degenerated into centres of neglect,” says Lara*, a Berlin primary school teacher who is not in the union but is part of the Action Committees for Safe Education network. We spoke with her about the latest contract, which education union GEW and service union Verdi agreed on November 29.

Lara teaches in Berlin-Neukölln. She speaks from the heart of many colleagues when she calls the latest wage settlement “simply ridiculous.” “That’s why I’m not a member of the GEW,” she says. “The GEW has not been involved in any way with measures such as school closures, alternate teaching, or anything that could have reduced the incidence of infection. Duty of care, educational mandate or preventive health care—they’re not interested in any of that.”

She continues, “During bargaining sessions, all the unions talk about is ‘better pay,’ which turns out to be a paltry 2.8 percent for two years. So that’s 1.4 percent more pay per year, with inflation now already exceeding 5 percent! And the wage increase won’t come for another year, either.”

The coronavirus bonus that the GEW likes to highlight is also a disappointment, she said. “For entrants like me with a different career background and for the trainees—that is, in Berlin for 40 percent of all teachers—there is a bonus not of €1,300, but only €650. Yet we perform just as much and work under exactly the same dangers. We have been unscrupulously exploited under coronavirus conditions since the beginning of 2020—and then they agree such a contract!”

Lara works at a hotspot school in Berlin-Neukölln. She describes the casual approach to danger that career changers like her face on a daily basis. “After all, we are not typical students, but we are all teachers, practising teaching at different schools, several of them in real hotspots. That means the mixing of cohorts is extreme. As a subject teacher, you’re in different classes, and each class has over 20 kids. With four classes a week, that’s 80 to 100 kids you’re in contact with. And then you go to study groups at least once a week, where you meet 30 colleagues from other schools. I can’t imagine a greater collection of infection opportunities.”

The threat of a pandemic also lurks daily in classrooms. Testing is done at the school three times a week, but that is completely uncertain, she says. She explains, “There are more than 20 students in a class. With such large classes, it’s just difficult to keep an eye on every child, and it’s not very pleasant to stick the test probe deep up your nose. Some are just pretending, and there’s no guarantee that everyone will take the test properly.” Basically, it should be done quite differently, she continues. “The kids should have to test themselves before coming in. Many even come in without masks, because there’s often no check at the entrance due to a lack of staff.”

In Berlin, Education Senator (state minister) Sandra Scheeres (Social Democrat, SPD), who is also a Verdi member, lifted the mask requirement a week before the autumn vacations. Since then, infections at schools have risen dramatically. At the time of the interview, over 4,500 students were infected. In addition, 470 teachers have already been infected since the pandemic began.

Lara describes what full in-person classes are like now. “Masks are only required in the school corridors: no longer in classrooms, and not even in the school yard, where cohorts really mix. Of course, children don’t wear masks in the cafeteria either, where they eat. The classes are absolutely insane. You’re sitting there with over 20 kids who keep coming up to your desk, or you go up to them and explain something. Teachers can’t protect themselves, especially in an elementary school. There, the interaction is much closer than in a high school. Kids need a lot of affection, and you can’t possibly keep your distance.”

At her school, very soon several colleagues had fallen ill and children had tested positive. Eventually, Lara herself became infected with COVID-19.

“When the second child in my class tested positive for coronavirus, I pleaded for the class to be quarantined or at least the reintroduction of mandatory mask-wearing in the classroom as well—this was refused. Nothing was done by the school administration; until I had the third and the fourth case, and more and more children became ill. Even when I tried to put compulsory mask-wearing and class quarantines on the agenda of a meeting, this was simply ignored.

“Shortly after that, three to four cases appeared in every single class; there were more and more. I have counted nine cases in total in my class so far this school year, and one colleague was in the hospital for weeks with a vaccine breakthrough infection.

“Only when it was too late and numerous colleagues and school assistants had already fallen ill did Mrs. Scheeres, the senator, reintroduce the compulsory use of masks.

“I felt very bad after a school trip and tested myself on the way home, full of fear that I could infect my family, including my grandparents. And I was positive! I immediately separated myself from the family, completely isolated myself in a room on my own, and luckily I didn’t infect anyone else from my family. That was by a hair’s breadth, and for a family, that’s really hard, too.”

She has also experienced how the rapid tests are not reliable. Although Lara had already noticed typical symptoms in herself, her

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tests initially returned negative results several times.

Later, when she was able to return to work, colleagues came to her and apologized for not taking her warnings seriously. Lara told them, “You guys have also just been victims of all the downplaying and misinformation.” In fact, the government and media have systematically suppressed the scientific evidence and continue to spread lies and misinformation to this day.

Teachers have been put at great risk, Lara feels, especially when they have families and children of their own. “This is not a natural disaster, but a politically made disaster, costing the lives of millions worldwide and cutting short the lives of many more millions. Why didn’t politicians around the world react together and shut everything down for a few weeks?”

Currently, there are calls everywhere for compulsory vaccination, but even that falls short, Lara believes. One should not put all the blame on the unvaccinated, she says. “At our school, many families of Arab or Turkish origin are simply poorly informed. Many don’t know what’s going on, have poor access to valid information, or are confused by fake news.”

The pandemic has also brought to a head the grievances in schools that existed before. Lara, who is paid as a career-changer, teaches normally in the classroom. Desperation over the prevailing staff shortage is so high that even entry-level teachers must take on leading tasks. There is a shortage of fully trained educators, and school principals are falling away all over Berlin. Schools should have two principals, but a great many have only one. “At our school, the school leadership was missing for six months, and the secretary’s office was also unstaffed for a while,” Lara reports.

A teacher normally has 28 teaching hours a week, plus preparation and follow-up, parent meetings and conferences, etc., a truly all-round job that cannot be managed even with 40 hours a week. For career changers, the workload is no less: they are credited with 11 of the 28 hours attendance for their studies, leaving 17 teaching hours. But that is not all, the administrative tasks are also added for career changers in addition to their studies.

Even Lara, who works part-time with “only” 13 hours instead of 17 because she has a family with school-age children of her own, still works, as she says, “eight hours a day, often at night and on weekends. As a class leader, you can’t switch off at all.”

Preparing the lessons and producing the school materials alone takes an enormous amount of time. In elementary school classes, preparation has to be done in a differentiated way. She explains, “There are many pupils whose first language is not German, who have hardly attended school in their home countries. There are also illiterate children, as well as children with learning difficulties and physical disabilities. For each lesson, you need to prepare three different lessons with three sets of materials: for the strong learners, the weak learners and the language learners.”

Then there is the work with parents, which brings a lot of conflict, especially in socially deprived neighbourhoods. “Some parents react emotionally themselves. There are socio-educational posts, but at our school it is only staffed by one person, and that one person is often not there. When conflicts arise, everything has to be logged, filed and followed up.” You’re busy with every single kid, she says. “Each one is your personal client, and you have to find out and know all their strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly.”

Personal life, she says, falls completely by the wayside. Lara herself has experienced how quickly it can lead to burnout. “I was close to depression, often sitting there apathetic and unable to do anything.”

webinars it has conducted with international scientists, Lara knows there is definitely a way out of the pandemic. “The WSWS publicized scientific models that correctly predicted the future course and demonstrated early on that new variants [like Omicron] would emerge under current conditions.”

Asked how she envisions a solution for schools, Lara responds, “I would like to see a major worldwide information campaign in all languages! For schools, I would like to see a lockdown over Christmas until at least New Year until the pandemic is stopped!

“Then it might be possible for families to get together again. When schools start up again, they could be organized very differently. We need twice as many teachers and enough room, smaller classes and a strong expansion of digital teaching. We’ve had practice with that by now, and it would work much better now.

“School classes need to be cut at least in half, as was the case with the alternating classes [half learning at home and half in school]. It was an excellent experience, everyone liked it. The students liked it too, and they were much more motivated to learn. In the small groups, there was also less potential for conflict, parents were relieved, and the risk of infection was controllable. However, the reality is completely different.”

That’s why the recent contract was such a slap in the face to all teachers, she said. In Lara’s eyes, the unions were only shadow boxing, “not about the struggles that staff have to fight every day. They don’t do anything for that. This is a caste that takes care of itself. The union officials are not on the side of the teachers, the children and the parents. They are on the side of the politicians.

“They have cut so many posts all these years, and they have put everything on the teachers. There’s no thought about good teaching at all, let alone a work-life balance for teachers.”

Talking about money, a lot more could be done, she said. “The politicians should just give every school €5 million: We need proper toilets! The hygienic conditions are catastrophic—broken doors, broken chairs, dirty desks and walls ... The learning atmosphere is atrocious. We have exactly one photocopier for the whole school! There’s not enough budget for copy paper, and you have to scrape together the money for it from your own funds.”

Lara points out what all this means for the children: “Students go to school with fears, not just for their own lives. The school doesn’t offer them any protection from coronavirus. It’s simply a detention centre now to push parents into work. It’s no longer about education, nurturing, or caring, but the whole thing is just one giant detention centre.”

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