

Collective bargaining agreement in Germany's public sector: a slap in the face for all workers

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After more than twenty months of the coronavirus pandemic, trade union and government representatives have made clear to workers employed by Germany's federal states that they must not only risk their health and even their lives to pay for the ruling elite's "profits before life" pandemic policy but sacrifice their wages and salaries.

The Verdi (United Service Union), GEW (Union for Education and Science), IG BAU (Industrial Union for Construction, Agriculture, Environment) trade unions as well as the police and civil servants' unions on Monday sold out the collective bargaining struggle involving employees of Germany's 16 federal states.

The unions initially demanded a five percent wage increase over a period of twelve months, or at least €150, and at least €300 per month in the health sector. Given the current inflation rate of 5.2 percent, even that would have been an effective wage cut.

But now the 1.1 million federal state employees will initially receive nothing for 14 months. Not for one year, on December 1, 2022, will the wages of all employees be increased by 2.8 percent. The remuneration of trainees, interns and students will be increased by €50 (€100 was demanded) or by €70 in the health care system in one year's time.

In March of next year, there will be a one-off payment of €1,300 euros for employees. Apprentices, interns and students will receive half this amount. The collective agreement has a term of 24 months until the end of September 2023.

The employers immediately agreed to extend the same pathetic wage result to the 1.4 million civil servants and about one million pension recipients.

The demand for a collective agreement for student assistants has vanished into thin air, as has the demand for improvements in working conditions in road maintenance and road construction. The GEW's perennial call for equal pay for all teachers, whether they work on temporary

contracts or hold permanent appointments as civil servants, was once again dropped.

This time the GEW gave the following bankrupt excuse for dropping the demand for equal pay: "In this collective bargaining round, the GEW finally wanted to achieve the full parallel pay scale for contract teachers." But the federal states asked for cutbacks to the pay grades. "The unions now had to repel this attack on a cornerstone of the right to pay grades," it wrote. In return, the federal states refused to negotiate the "structural" demands of the unions. "This also included the parallel pay scale," the union continued. "The GEW will continue to push this issue."

In an attempt to cover up the union's betrayal, Verdi head Frank Werneke said, "This is a largely respectable result," adding, "It secures noticeable income improvements for a whole range of health care workers and is another intermediate step on our way to improving working conditions in the health care sector." The union will continue this in future collective bargaining rounds.

If the matter at hand were not so serious, one could laugh. Whom are Verdi and the GEW trying to kid? Only those on the unions' payroll will be impressed by these absurd statements.

Hundreds of workers immediately spoke out indignantly on the internet and on social media. Sil Jan wrote on Facebook of Verdi, "This is really very depressing. During this time, respect and appreciation would be appropriate, especially for the colleagues in health care and in the social services. This is not even remotely respectable. We are obviously dispensable after all."

Mike wrote, "The collective bargaining was just a sham negotiation to trick members into thinking they were bargaining." The fact that Verdi head Werneke is trying to sell it as a good deal is "much worse than the truly bad 'agreement'!"

Thomas wrote, "I did not strike for this result." He does not intend to vote for the agreement. Many others confirm

that they “definitely did not go on strike for this result.” Many have announced that they will be leaving the union. “Fortunately, there is still the option going forward of saving the monthly dues payment in order to have a little more money,” commented Sven. “Thanks Verdi, for nothing,” added Anja.

On the GEW’s page, Fridolin reported, “I already shook my head at the last one... But this agreement is even worse... How can they tolerate being treated like that?... This is so weak !!! ... in the high phase of the economic upswing and also in the pandemic !!!” He appealed for an expansion of strikes instead of capitulation.

Stephan Brylka wrote in frustration, “And the educators and other educational staff have once again received a slap in the face. And I’m supposed to convince my colleagues to join the GEW.”

Guido stated bluntly, “I feel ripped off. The pensions go up by over four percent and for us there is 1.4 percent. It would have been better to keep on striking.”

M. Willemsen was just as angry about the deal, asking, “Why don’t the unions call for strikes? At five percent inflation, that is a real wage loss of five percent!... Is this how we attract employees to work in hospitals? Hospitals, schools, kindergartens are supposedly essential services - what remains of that in the pay packet - nothing!” What was the point of the strikes over recent weeks, they wondered.

The GEW national executive replied, “As bitter as it is, without these job actions there would not even have been this agreement.” The employers resisted to the end, “knowing full well that a job action could not have been carried out on this scale in times of steadily increasing infections.”

In other words, the state governments knew perfectly well that the unions would give in. “Of course, we also wanted an earlier pay increase that will impact pay scales,” complained the union leadership. “But the employers didn’t want that.”

This is an official declaration of utter bankruptcy. If the unions can only deliver what the employers want, what is the point of having unions? The many comments stating the strike should have gone further and more extensively show workers’ readiness to fight.

But the unions deliberately isolated the strikes in hospitals, schools, and government services. The protests they organized were token events aimed only at letting off steam. The union leaderships are in cahoots with the employers, are often members of the same political parties, and regularly exchange well-paid positions in the union bureaucracy for senior government posts, and vice versa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed as never before the subordination of the unions to the capitalist drive for profits at the expense of any consideration for public welfare.

Health care workers have achieved incredible feats to keep hospitals running. Since the beginning of the pandemic, almost 140,000 people have been treated with COVID-19 in an intensive care unit, and the official COVID-19 death toll is 101,000. Of the approximately 4,500 COVID intensive care patients nationwide, more than half are on a ventilator. Thousands of intensive care beds can no longer be operated due to mental and physical burnout among nurses.

Despite this, Verdi and the GEW still insist that the schools remain open and that a lockdown must be avoided. A teacher from Duisburg wrote to the WSWs that “much more ruthless” than the real terms pay cut is the fact that the unions have “No plan to eradicate the virus, but rather the expectation that we teachers will continue to put our bodies on the line and help organize death.”

The latest sell-out underscores once again that the unions are on the side of government and big business. In view of the catastrophic COVID-19 situation, public sector workers must urgently organise themselves independently of the unions. Contact us to discuss how to build a network of rank-and-file committees in schools, hospitals, government agencies, and factories to organise resistance to the ruling-class policy of death and build a globally coordinated effort to eliminate COVID-19.

As part of the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, we are collecting reports on the experiences of workers to document the impact of the pandemic on working people. We call on all those who are no longer prepared to tolerate the unions’ sacrificing of workers’ health and lives on behalf of the rich to support and participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest.



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