

Renewed strikes at German day care and social services centres

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10 April 2022

Recently renewed strikes at German day care and state social services centres express mounting popular anger. After enduring pandemic conditions for over two years, day care teachers as well as social workers and assistants who care for the disabled are demanding tangible relief, more staff, serious measures to protect their health and a salary increase to keep pace with rising inflation.

The strikes are part of a growing movement of the international working class. Across Europe and around the world, workers in public services, schools, airports, industry and logistics are no longer willing to endure permanent work stress, staff shortages and health hazards, while barely earning enough to survive. The strikes coincide with protests by teachers in the US and truck drivers in Spain, general strikes in India and Greece, and a social uprising in Sri Lanka, among other demonstrations of mass discontent.

The next round of collective bargaining in the social and educational services is more than two years overdue. The previous five-year collective agreement expired at the end of 2019. The coronavirus pandemic was seized upon as an excuse for an extended delay, with negotiations on a new contract beginning only at the end of February of this year.

German day care workers are fully justified in demanding better conditions, tangible relief and more recognition, and they have the sympathy of the working class. To win their demands, however, they will have to break with the dominant service-sector union, Verdi, and establish independent rank-and-file committees to end the isolation of their struggle by connecting with others engaged in labour disputes.

Verdi will not fight for real change. The union is fully on the side of the federal coalition government, consisting of the Social Democratic Party, the Free Democratic Party and the Green Party, and the business interests the government serves. Just a few days after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Verdi boss Frank Werneke proclaimed his full support for the anti-Russian sanctions that have fuelled spiralling prices. It was “appropriate and necessary to react with sanctions,” said Werneke in Berlin on February 27.

Since then, the Verdi leadership has reconvened with the Association of Municipal Employers’ Associations (VKA) in an attempt to reassert control over the growing labour conflict in the municipal sector. On March 21 and 22, Verdi executives Frank Werneke and Christine Behle met with VKA President Karin Welge, like the union officials a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The third and final round of negotiations is to take place on May 16 and 17.

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD) is using the war in Ukraine to launch the largest rearmament campaign since the regime of Hitler, allocating 100 billion euros to the armed forces while bleeding the public sector dry. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (also SPD) recently spoke openly about this, stating: “The whole truth is: many hardships still lie ahead.” He demanded not only “solidarity” from Germany’s working population, but also a “willingness to accept privations.”

This is the background to Verdi’s collective bargaining tactics in the social and educational services. Each strike is isolated from all other strikes, including those of schoolteachers, in order to avoid the spread of open resistance. The union indistinctly demands a “round of improvements,” but fails to provide any concrete figures, either in euros or percentages. Nor does it stipulate specific staffing ratios or reduced working hours.

Meanwhile, municipal employers have made it abundantly clear that their finances can bear no additional burdens. Any new demands would “lead to serious imbalances in the collective bargaining structure of the municipal public sector and to disproportionate and unaffordable increases in personnel costs,” said Karin Welge, the mayor of Gelsenkirchen and VKA chairwoman.

She took over the post from the previous head of the VKA, Ulrich Mägde, on January 1, 2022. She presides over an association that represents the interests of 10,000 municipal employers, who employ some 2.3 million workers.

As recently as December, the German Association of Cities found that municipalities were short 230,000

educators and 300,000 nurses, but Ms. Welge refused to provide what she called improvements “from a watering can.” This she justified by claiming that “working and pay conditions [in the social and educational services] were already raised significantly in 2009 and 2015.”

In reality, the 2015 day care strike won only modest improvements in pay, but these have not changed the burdensome framework of working conditions. The groups of children remain far too large, staff shortages are widespread, and the number of untrained staff is growing, increasing the workload of the trained professionals to an unbearable level. Moreover, new waves of the coronavirus pandemic continue to wash over the already ailing and overburdened municipal facilities.

And while governments are dropping all pandemic protection measures, the highly contagious Omicron BA.2 variant is sweeping through day care centres. Many facilities, such as in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, are no longer able to provide regular care due to staff shortages caused by rampant coronavirus infections.

Speaking to the WSWS on April 7, during the strike in Offenbach, kindergarten teachers affirmed these grievances. “I am dead tired every evening and just glad to get home,” one teacher said.

She described the additional burdens of a poorly implemented inclusion program. “You have in a group of 20 children sometimes several disabled children who need special attention, but you get no additional staff at all,” she explained. She added that at this stress level, she feared she would not hold out until retirement age.

“Financially, we achieved a lot in 2015 with our last big strike,” said Ulla, who works in social services. “But those gains have been eroding. Right now, we are living through the highest inflation in years. That may not be a problem for members of the Bundestag (German parliament), whose salaries are automatically scaled up, even though they are paid on another level in the first place. But it is a problem for us.”

One day care teacher added: “After the strike, the key—how many children there are for one day care teacher—was quietly brushed under the rug. It’s only gotten worse since then.”

Michaela, who has worked in day care for seven years, confirmed this. She said: “We definitely need an improvement in group sizes!”

She explained that in her facility it was normal for a trained teacher to care for a group of up to 30 children with an untrained assistant.

“Sometimes there is a third person, but they are usually lateral hires. For example, I am often all alone in the afternoons, and the children are getting picked up later and

later. When you’re alone with all these children, you can’t really do anything, just keep them safe. It’s almost become just a custodial institution.”

As she reported, she herself had recently contracted the coronavirus, although as a high-risk patient she should have been provided extra protection. “It hit me hard, even though I was vaccinated and boosted,” she said. “If someone older gets even close to as sick as I got, that can be really dangerous.”

Michaela said her jaw dropped in dismay at German Health Minister Karl Lauterbach’s announcement (since rescinded): “Every infected person should decide for himself whether to stay home with the coronavirus!” She pointed out that the coronavirus policy in Germany had been inconsistently implemented from the beginning: “The schools were partly closed at the beginning, partly separated into small groups. You weren’t allowed to play sports, not even outdoors—but the kids came to school in buses that were packed!”

Katarina, an Offenbach educator, added: “Now the government suddenly has 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr (military). Surely, that shows there’s enough money.”

She confirmed that all parties support this war policy, including the Left Party. “But I’m not that surprised about that anymore,” she said. “We already had the experience with the Greens. As soon as they got into government, they suddenly forgot everything they had said up until then.”

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) calls on all day care and social service workers to participate in building rank-and-file committees that operate independently of all German Labour Confederation (DGB) unions and network with organized teachers and other sections of the working class.



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