“System-relevant & budgeted to death”: Child care personnel demand better working conditions

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“Come in and burn out,” “We are at our limits,” “Battery empty—I can do no more,” “System-relevant & budgeted to death”—these and similar were the slogans of the protesting day care workers who took to the streets on Wednesday, May 4. Around 26,000 kindergarten teachers across Germany took part in the one-day warning strike. At the rallies, they wrote demands such as “More staff!” “Better pay!” “Smaller groups!” in crayon on the pavement.

The crisis in the chronically underbudgeted facilities is palpable. At Frankfurt’s Hauptwache, where striking day care staff from the Rhine-Main region convened, educators described to this WSWS correspondent the constant stress, lack of staff, overwork, fear of COVID-19 contagion and concern about wage losses in the face of rising inflation.

“Somehow the shop is supposed to keep running, but the staff we need is missing,” said educator Felix. “There are outbreaks among the children all the time. Since the coronavirus pandemic started, colleagues are constantly sick or in quarantine. The coronavirus pandemic was bad, but we worked throughout the whole thing.”

Caro from Dietzenbach reported the many sick among colleagues and the fatalities among acquaintances: “They were perhaps older, but they could have lived a number of years more.”

Hanne from Frankfurt made clear the challenges that day care center staff face on a daily basis: “We have up to 25 children per specialist. With the very small ones, the preschool children, there should actually be three of us looking after 12 children, but getting that always takes a fight. Very often it’s just not possible, and sometimes you’re all alone.”

Timo from Offenbach objected that during the lockdown period, absurdly, one could see “that everything would work much better with small groups. That was clear to everyone. But no lessons are being drawn from this. Now the groups are bursting at the seams again.”

While a specialist has up to five years of training (most of it unpaid), a large part of the day care staff today consists of lateral entrants (i.e., the untrained). “In our case, that’s practically half the staff who works without specialized training,” Caro confirmed to us. “All well and good, but we are jointly responsible for what they do.” Lateral entrants also earn significantly less, she added: “They worry the most about inflation.”

Caro said that the Green-Black Hessian state government (a coalition of the Green Party and the conservative Christian Democrats, CDU) was misusing the wave of refugees from Ukraine to suspend the rules: “We are now supposed to ‘temporarily exceed’ the group sizes in the kindergartens, up to 30 children in one group. This supposedly does not require additional specialized teachers.” Other strikers also confirm that their facility has received such instructions from the state government.

“We put up with it all for two years,” says Janine. “Now, when the politicians should be actively supporting us, we are being let down.” At the same time, however, there is enough money to rearm the military, she notes. “Really bad,” says Hanne about the German government’s decision to provide an additional 100 billion euro for the Bundeswehr (the German armed forces). She adds, “Politics aside, for education we need much, much more money, that’s completely obvious!”

In a survey last year, two-thirds of day care workers polled said they regularly had to work unpaid overtime, and about 30 percent said it was impossible for them to meet their own standards for the job. On average, there was a shortage of at least three skilled workers per day care center, which equates to well over 170,000 missing skilled workers at 57,600 day care centers nationwide.

Reports by day care workers make clear what is going wrong in child care. “It’s simply a child storage facility now,” as one day care worker recently put it. This week’s protests also show that day care workers enjoy popular support. In order to push through the necessary social changes, however, it is now necessary to establish independent rank-and-file committees in every day care center and every welfare station for workers to take the fight into their own hands, together with parents, most of whom are workers themselves.

The services union Verdi, on the other hand, which called the warning strikes, is using the collective bargaining struggle to

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“blow off steam” and avoid a looming political battle against the government. It turns the rallies into very loud but non-political whistle protests.

In fact, the union is acting as the fourth wheel on the wagon of the governing federal “traffic-light coalition” of Social Democrats (SPD, red), liberal Free Democrats (FDP, yellow) and the Green Party, which is seizing the opportunity presented by the Ukraine crisis to advance the return of German militarism. With the support of all Bundestag (federal parliament) parties and the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), the German government is supplying massive quantities of weapons for fighting Russia and is domestically ruthlessly pushing for war, despite the antipathy of the working population.

The population must “make sacrifices,” demanded German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) on March 27 at Bellevue Palace, when he announced the sanctions against Russia with the words: “The whole truth is: many hardships still lie ahead.”

Verdi head Frank Werneke (SPD) supports the war drive of the Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s government. He publicly described the sanctions against Russia as “appropriate and necessary” on Sunday, February 27, in Berlin.

The Verdi leadership is deeply integrated into the German economy. Werneke’s predecessor, Frank Bsirske, bequeathed to him not only his post as Verdi chairman, but also his high-paying post on the supervisory board of Deutsche Bank. The second Verdi chairman, Christine Behle, also sits on numerous supervisory boards, most notably at Lufthansa AG. Bsirske, for his part, is now a supporting pillar of the “traffic light” coalition government in the Bundestag as a member of the Green Party who voted to re-elect Frank-Walter Steinmeier as president in the 17th Federal Assembly.

Seven years ago, Bsirske used every trick in the book to throttle and sell-out a similar labor dispute demanding “improvements” in social and educational services. That was the day care strike of 2015. Since then nothing has improved, but rather quite the opposite: groups sizes are getting larger and larger, the staff is getting smaller and smaller and income is being devoured by inflation.

When the coronavirus pandemic broke out, Verdi used it to delay negotiations with the Association of Municipal Employers’ Associations (VKA) for two years. It was not until January 2022, seven years after the 2015 agreement, that negotiations on working conditions in day care centers officially resumed.

The Verdi leadership is taking the government’s war drive into consideration. It made this clear in the first two rounds of negotiations. The negotiations are supposed to set the framework conditions for about 330,000 employees who are paid according to the collective agreement for the public sector, and they indirectly affect 1.2 million employees. However, Verdi has not made any serious demand for a sliding wage scale, to compensate for inflation, although inflation hit 7.3 percent in March and continues to rise.

The union is conspicuously reticent in other respects. Its demands are vaguely formulated and leave room for a variety of interpretations. They read: “Improvement of groupings, adjustment of grade durations, full recognition of professional experience, improvement in the evaluation of management activities and a legal right to qualifications.”

Several times, the VKA president, Karin Welge (SPD), who is also the mayor of the city of Gelsenkirchen, has arrogantly rejected all worker demands and emphasized that there is “no money for upgrading across the board.” She considers strikes in the current situation to be irresponsible.

Nevertheless, this week Werneke again made assurances that Verdi-led warning strikes were deliberately “very targeted, very dosed, day by day, in the hope that the employers move.” In 10 days, on May 16 and 17, Werneke and Behle intend to meet with Welge for a third, final round of negotiations in Potsdam, coming to an agreement if possible and definitely continuing to bleed the day care staff white.

As this takes place, strikes and protests are breaking out far and wide, including in other areas of employment for which Verdi is responsible: in North Rhine-Westphalia among nursing staff, who want to remedy the untenable situation in clinics with an indefinite strike, and also in public transport, among bus, streetcar and suburban train operators as well as in logistics, at Paketpost, Amazon and the delivery service Lieferando. The unrest is developing in tandem with increasing opposition within the working class around the world, which is taking a stand against war, the pandemic and social cuts.

The *WSWS* and the Socialist Equality Parties advocate the unification of these struggles with the goal of abolishing capitalism worldwide. Both in the kindergartens and in every other area, it is becoming clear that the defense of wages and living conditions requires a break with the unions, a rejection of their nationalism, and a united, international struggle for a socialist program.

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