

Social workers and day care educators carry out warning strikes throughout Germany

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Warning strikes and rallies involving workers in social and educational services have been taking place across Germany for two and a half months.

On Wednesday, the third and final round of negotiations began in Potsdam. The workers are fighting for better conditions, higher pay scales and reduced workloads. But the negotiations being conducted with the municipal employers by the Verdi and GEW unions, together with the German Civil Servants' Federation, will not resolve any of their problems.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, nursery and social workers have been deemed “essential workers.” At great risk, they have worked the entire time, many contracting COVID-19.

In working class neighbourhoods and social hotspots, they bear the brunt of providing child care, child and youth welfare services, refugee assistance and disability services. But their working conditions have not improved for seven years, since the big day care strike of 2015. Due to the great stress and poor pay in the sector, there is now a shortage of over 173,000 workers at nurseries and day care centres.

In recent weeks, thousands have taken to the streets across Germany. Several hundred social workers came to Hanover for a day of action on May 2, and over a thousand kindergarten teachers rallied in Frankfurt am Main on May 4. In Gelsenkirchen, 10,000 educators gathered on May 11, in Hamburg there were over 2,000 on May 12, and another 2,000 demonstrated in Munich.

Large rallies were also held in Kiel, Stuttgart, Leipzig and elsewhere. In Marburg, hundreds of underpaid employees of charitable welfare associations and church organisations protested, although they are not directly affected by the current negotiations. They also function as social workers in schools and centres for the disabled.

Despite a boycott by the major media outlets, the social workers and day care centre workers succeeded in making

it clear to the public that things cannot go on like they are. “Day care centres are bursting at the seams, we have no staff,” one kindergarten teacher in Frankfurt said. Another added, “I can’t go on, I’m already exhausted by 11 o’clock in the morning.”

A day care centre director in Bremen said, “I wish politicians would come and work with us for at least one day. Then maybe they will see that this is not just talk from us. The situation is damn serious.”

Many express fears about the future on Twitter. One worker tweeted, “I love my job, but I don’t think I can do it until retirement age.” Practically all agree on waging a longer and more aggressive strike if necessary.

The outbreak of protests by social and education workers is part of a larger movement that is also increasingly affecting health workers. For example, a strike at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) has just been extended until May 26. At NRW university hospitals, over 98 percent voted for an indefinite strike. In Frankfurt am Main and Stuttgart there have already been joint rallies of social service workers and nurses.

This movement is by no means limited to Germany. Nurses are currently on strike in Madrid and in California. They are demonstrating throughout Vienna and are at the forefront of the social uprising in Sri Lanka. In Finland, nurses went on strike for a fortnight in April. In Nashville, Tennessee, nurses protested on behalf of a colleague accused of being solely responsible for a tragic medication error. There is also a growing willingness to strike in industry and logistics.

The protests by educators at day care centres and workers in social services are part of this growing movement. Their demands for relief from intolerable work pressures and for better pay resonate strongly with working people. A Forsa survey showed that 87 percent of respondents thought the demand for better pay was

justified, and 81 percent would support shorter work hours in social and care services.

However, the negotiations in Potsdam will not bring any solution. This is the third and, for the time being, last round of negotiations. The negotiators from Verdi (public sector union), the GEW (education union) and the dbb (civil service union) represent the same political programme and belong to the same parties—the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens, Christian Democrats (CDU)—as their counterparts, the representatives of the Federation of Municipal Employers' Associations (VKA), with whom they are supposedly negotiating.

The establishment politicians have once again increased the pressure on day care workers and social workers. The federal government has decided to prepare for open war against Russia, and the working class, above all public sector workers, are to bear the cost.

While the federal coalition of the SPD, Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP) has pulled a special fund of €100 billion for the Bundeswehr (German military) out of the hat, the demands of public service workers are allegedly “not realisable for cost reasons.” This was stated by VKA President Karin Welge (SPD) in an interview with the German press agency dpa.

Welge went on to say that especially in view of the consequences of the Ukraine war and higher energy prices, municipal employers must be able to offer “reliable structures.” “We cannot provide general salary enhancements in the sense that every pay group gets more,” the VKA President said.

Politicians from all the establishment parties are already preparing measures to suppress resistance from the working class. In Saxony, one mayor responded to a warning strike with a lockout. The mayor of Öbisfelde-Weferlingen responded to the all-day warning strike on May 13 by shutting down all of the town's day care centres and after-school care centres for the day, locking out all workers without pay. In doing so, he prevented the establishment of emergency child care arrangements and punished those who did not receive Verdi strike pay.

In Hesse, the state government told day care centres that it would raise the number of children per specialist from 25 to 30 with immediate effect, due to the influx of refugees from Ukraine. This is their answer to the demand for “relief.”

The trade unions have no answer to these attacks. Verdi leaders Frank Werneke and Christine Behle (both SPD), who have headed the negotiations in Potsdam, share the views of the government politicians on the war against

Russia. They are not prepared to call on the working class to take real industrial action, even if the negotiations fail.

On the contrary, the demands being advanced by Verdi are designed to stall industrial action and reach a rotten compromise. They are aimed at achieving slightly better pay through the manipulation of pay scales. They are demanding an extension of the time allowed for preparation and follow-up work, as well as better conditions for the qualification of those joining the profession from other fields, who make up an increasingly large part of the staff. On all of these questions, mini-compromises can be reached that are then counteracted twice and three times over by concessions on other issues.

The demands also distract from the fact that the unions are not defending public sector workers against skyrocketing inflation. As a result of the billions given to the banks and corporations in the financial crisis and the pandemic, as well as the sanctions against Russia, inflation officially rose to 7.4 percent in April. For energy and food it is already much higher.

The introduction of a sliding scale of wages is therefore urgently needed throughout the public sector, although it alone would not improve the educators' profession.

There is no question that the working class is ready to fight. But it must no longer allow itself to be ordered about by Verdi, GEW, dbb & Co. Significantly, Verdi leader Frank Werneke stressed on the first day of negotiations in Potsdam, “From our side, we have no interest in a week-long strike.”

The strike in social and educational services can be brought to a successful conclusion only if the workers organise themselves in independent rank-and-file action committees, join forces with care workers and other sections of the working class, including internationally, and take all decisions into their own hands! The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) urges workers to contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and pledges to support and assist any such move. Register using the form below.



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