

Germany: Vote "NO" to the sell-out contract in education and social services!

Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education (Netzwerk der Aktionskomitees für sichere Bildung)
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Members of the German social and educational services union Verdi are being asked to vote by June on an agreement reached by union officials on Wednesday with the German Association of Municipal Employers (VKA). The Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education calls on all employees in German day care centres and social institutions to vote “No”!

The agreement is not worth the paper it is written on. It can only be described as a sellout of the struggle that thousands have been waging since the beginning of March for improvements in the working conditions in the social work and education professions. The agreement runs for a duration of five years, from the beginning of 2022 to the end of 2026! Thus, its main function is to stifle the growing strike movement in daycare centres and public services and isolate them from the rest of the working class. “There will be no more strikes,” celebrated the teachers’ union (GEW) in its commentary on the new contract.

The deal provides two additional days off a year; two more free days can be had by foregoing a new bonus. This comes amid conditions of dramatic staff shortage, in which the employees must “voluntarily” step in for extra shifts on a regular basis, work in their free time and ruin their health. Nationwide, there is a shortage of more than 173,000 employees in daycare centres, many having dropped out due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the workload is constantly increasing. Across the board, state politicians are exploiting Ukrainian refugees to increase the number of children per teacher from 25 to 30.

“More requires more!” was one of the most popular slogans in the warning strikes and rallies in recent weeks. The aforementioned bonus consists of a monthly supplement of 130 euro starting in July for education workers, with social workers getting 180

euro, all before taxes, of course! At best, this is an extra hundred euro in the bank as prices continue to surge. Moreover, a long-overdue pay adjustment in the collective agreement for the public sector (TVöD) will not be applied for another two years, only starting October 2024.

The collective agreement for the social and educational services is a supplementary agreement to the TVöD that does not expire until December 2022 and, with a wage “increase” of 1.8 percent this year, represents an effective real wage reduction. Inflation already rose to 7.4 percent in April, not to mention the even larger inflation of gasoline, energy and food prices.

The contract negotiations shifted locations from Potsdam to Berlin on Tuesday evening. The agreement reached there will be accepted by the German teachers union (GEW) and the German civil servants association (dbb). It applies to all permanent employees in the German municipal and federal government (with the exception of Berlin). In earlier periods, the same collective agreement was adopted by private concerns, the church and charitable organizations, though its provisions were never guaranteed.

And what about the many permanent employees not in the public sector who do the same work as incoming hires from other fields and assistants? They are still being strung out on minimum wage.

While the German government is pumping out triple-digit billions for armaments, and shareholders are celebrating highs on the stock markets, the new contract amounts to a blatant mockery, even an insult, for social workers and educators. They are receiving a clear signal as to what the politicians in power consider paramount: Not supporting social service agencies with more staff, smaller groups and better conditions so that

workers can breathe a little easier. Rather, degrading their facilities to the point of resembling detention centres.

In recent weeks, not only have thousands of daycare workers and social workers taken to the streets against impossible working conditions, but also nurses, teachers and bus drivers have taken up the fight. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, nurses at six university hospitals have been waging an indefinite industrial action since the beginning of May. This movement is part of a worldwide upsurge of strikes and protests against the social repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic and war.

But the unions of the German Trade Unions Confederation (DGB), led by Verdi, are siding with governments that want to contain this movement at all costs. The new coalition federal government (Social Democrats, liberal Free Democrats and Greens) has opted for massive rearmament, the cost of which is to be borne by the working class. Verdi leaders Frank Werneke and Christine Behle, who led the negotiations in Potsdam and Berlin, belong to the same governing party, the Social Democrats, and support the same politics as the negotiator on the opposite side of the table, Karin Welge.

The federal coalition government is determined to reinstate the so-called “debt brake” next year and return to the “black zero” austerity budget. The population must “make sacrifices,” demanded German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) at Bellevue Palace on March 27, when he announced sanctions against Russia with the words: “The whole truth is: many hardships still lie ahead.” The new collective agreement follows that line, and it clearly shows who is expected to make that sacrifice.

The Network of Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education calls on all public sector workers and the entire working class to take a stand and refuse to be used to finance war policies in the interests of the wealthy shareholders that will lead to a Third World War. Put an end to the “profits before lives” politics that has led to 140,000 unnecessary coronavirus deaths in Germany alone!

We propose to withdraw confidence from the DGB trade unions, strip them of their mandate to negotiate for workers and to establish independent rank-and-file committees in every company. Such action committees

are already playing an important role, including in labour struggles in parts of the US auto industry, at Ford in Germany and Spain, in the international Zero COVID movement for safe schools and in the tea plantations in Sri Lanka.

As a first step, the sellout in social and educational services must be decisively rejected! It is not the first of its kind. Seven years ago, Frank Werneke’s predecessor at the head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske (Green Party), strangled and sold out a major labour struggle for improvements in the social and educational services. Contrary to all promises, the situation has continued to deteriorate since the daycare strike of 2015. This must now come to an end.



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