

Before collective bargaining in Germany's public sector even begins, unions have sided with the government

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Contract bargaining for 2.5 million federal and local government employees may not begin until January, but the unions have kicked it off by announcing their demands.

The service sector union Verdi, the teachers' union GEW, building and construction union IG Bau, civil servants' association dbb and the police union (GdP) are demanding an increase in income of 10.5 percent, but at least €500 per month for a period of 12 months. Training allowances and trainee salaries are to be increased by €200 per month.

These demands, which are somewhat higher than those of other unions, are the result of growing pressure from below. Public sector workers have suffered massive losses in their incomes during the pandemic, and which are now literally melting away in the face of an official inflation rate of 10 percent. In addition, in many areas there has been an unbearable increase in workloads. In a survey in which 200,000 participated, 97 percent were in favour of focusing the bargaining round on a massive wage increase.

However, the unions' demands do not even cover the real wage losses of the last two years, which amount to more than 12 percent. In 2020, they had agreed to a contract that increased pay by a total of just 3.2 percent over a 28-month period. Even if the new demands were to be implemented in full, real incomes would fall by at least 10 percent in the coming year compared with 2020.

But Verdi, which is leading the negotiations, has not the slightest intention of fighting for this demand. On the contrary, it is forming a united front with the federal government, which is determined to impose the costs of the military build-up, the war in Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia onto public sector workers and the entire working class.

Resisting this attack requires three things:

- First, public sector workers can only assert their interests and demands in the struggle against the coalition government and its war policies.
- Second, this struggle cannot be waged with Verdi and

the other unions because they act as part of the government and support the war policy.

- Third, therefore, independent rank-and-file action committees must be formed in all workplaces to take the wages struggle into their own hands, to build links with workers in the metal and electrical industries who are also in a wage struggle, and to develop a broad movement against government.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz created the "Concerted Action" in the summer, bringing together representatives of the union, business and the government, to coordinate the attacks on wages and social gains and to suppress any resistance to them. Verdi boss Frank Werneke is playing a leading role in this.

A year ago, Verdi had already agreed to a massive reduction in real wages for the public sector in the federal states. They agreed to a 14-month wage freeze, with only a one-time payment of €1,300 in March. Collectively agreed wages will be increased by 2.8 percent not until December 1 of this year, and then no more until the end of the contract in September 2023.

Last week, the IG BCE union forged ahead and agreed a contract for the 580,000 employees in the chemical sector that amounts to a real wage cut of 15 percent over two years. Collectively agreed wages will rise by 3.25 percent at the beginning of each of the next two years. In addition, there are two one-off payments, but these have no effect on the future collective wage level, which will rise by only 6.5 percent over the course of 27 months despite record inflation.

The contract covering the chemical sector was agreed in the Concerted Action. It is intended to serve as a benchmark for the 3.8 million employees in the metal and electrical industries and the 2.5 million working in federal and local government. It shows what public sector employees can expect.

Three dates have already been set for collective bargaining

in Potsdam: on January 14, February 22-23 and March 27-29 next year. This is in line with the usual ritual. As usual, Verdi will talk big and organize a few warning strikes after the first round of negotiations to blow off steam, and hold a demonstration in Potsdam before the third—and then stage a sell-out along the lines of the chemical sector union.

Not only is Verdi working closely in the Concerted Action with the “traffic light” coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats and Greens, collective bargaining is taking place within a tight political family framework, so to speak. The negotiators for the federal government (Interior Minister Nancy Faeser) and for the municipalities (the president of the municipal employers’ association (KAV) and mayor of Gelsenkirchen, Karin Welge) are both members of the SPD, to which Verdi boss Frank Werneke has also belonged for 40 years.

Conditions in the public sector show the devastating consequences of this form of “social partnership” in almost microscopic detail. Since the end of the Second World War, never has the situation been as acute as it is now. The increase in prices, which for basic foodstuffs and energy is double and many times more than the official inflation rate of 10 percent, is being compounded by the consequences of the austerity programs and cuts in public budgets.

The real wage cuts of recent years and the intensification of exploitation have led to more and more employees fleeing the public sector and no new ones being found. A study by PwC Germany states not only that there is a shortage of workers in individual areas, but also predicts that by 2030 there will be a need for around 1 million employees in the entire public sector. In competition with private companies, the public sector is often not attractive enough when it comes to recruiting workers due to poor pay and working conditions.

The pandemic and the government’s ruthless policies of letting the coronavirus rip are further exacerbating the situation. Workers in transport companies, administrative offices, hospitals and other sectors are obliged to work under extremely hazardous health conditions. As the coronavirus wave swells again, sick leave grows and workloads continue to increase.

Verdi and the other unions not only idly accept this, they are preparing further attacks on wages and doing everything to turn the disaster into a social catastrophe.

Therefore, it is urgent to break the control of Verdi and the other unions and build independent rank-and-file action committees that take the wages struggle into their own hands. They must link resistance to wage cuts and intolerable workloads with the struggle against war and military rearmament.

A new form of organization, the building of independent

action committees, is necessary to lead the current wages struggles as part of an international mobilization of the working class. All over the world, more and more workers are participating in strikes and protests. They are fighting against job cuts, wage dumping, health hazards from coronavirus and the consequences of inflation. A general strike is brewing in the UK, and in France strikes and protests are expanding against the Macron government, which has effectively conscripted striking refinery workers.

However, these struggles always and everywhere come up against limits set for them by the trade unions. In Germany, this was most recently experienced by the nursing staff at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia, whose twelve-week strike was badly sold out by Verdi. In Saarlouis, the IG Metall union and the works council are organizing the shutdown of the Ford plant and sabotaging a struggle to defend jobs.

In response to the complete melding of the unions into the government and corporate camp, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) have created the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It is building a network of independent rank-and-file committees under democratic workers’ control. Such committees have already been established in many countries by workers in various industries. In Germany, auto workers, nurses and transportation workers, among others, have begun to build independent action committees.

Building rank-and-file committees of public sector workers is the most important preparation for the coming collective bargaining struggle. We call on all workers to contact us via WhatsApp message at the following number: +491633378340 or register here to build rank-and-file committees.



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