

# Berlin teachers speak out against war, austerity and the spread of COVID

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On Friday, some 2,500 salaried teachers, social pedagogues and school psychologists in Berlin took part in a day-long warning strike called by the Education and Science Union (GEW). The strikers demanded smaller classes and spoke out against the cuts policies of the Social Democratic (SPD)-Left Party-Green Senate (state executive), whose parties have been slashing education and social budgets for decades and have put profits before lives in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The GEW had already called warning strikes in September and October, with 3,500 teachers and other school workers taking part. The union is using the limited protest actions to try to control the immense anger that is developing among school staff everywhere in the face of the disastrous consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and decades of brutal cutbacks.

While the teachers' demands have enjoyed widespread support among the population for years, the union did everything possible to prevent a broader mobilisation during the teachers' strikes in April, and explicitly refused to raise even limited demands for coronavirus protective measures in schools.

At the rally at Nordbahnhof on Friday, members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party--SGP) spoke to striking teachers and handed out the SGP's election statement for the Berlin state elections. The re-run of these elections, in which the SGP is participating with a programme against war and social austerity, was recently set for 12 February next year.

SGP members called for an all-out strike and for the fight for safe education to be linked with the struggle against war and COVID-19. The SGP's demand to invest €100 billion in education and social welfare instead of armaments and war was widely supported.

"I just want more money to go into education instead of weapons, because then we would have the resources," said Karolin, who works as a part-time teacher at a primary school and a music school. "Every year at our municipal music school they say the money tap is closed," she added.

Karolin continued: "The children at my inclusive primary school have special needs. I am an educator, but we also require special needs teachers. We have been totally understaffed all year. I switched careers [to become a teacher], but I already

have some experience, which is not credited to me because the authorities are supposedly overwhelmed. For me, it means that I have been getting far too little money since August. As for the premises, there is no hot water in many schools, the conditions in the toilets are terrible.

"The burnout rate among colleagues is immense. So many are on long-term sick leave for psychological reasons. Since the Bologna reforms (ensuring compatibility of standards and qualifications in higher education throughout the EU), our profession has been academicized. We now need five years to complete our traineeship, but we are not properly prepared for it. I think many people are put off by this long study period, partly because it is not possible to go part-time. It is a very intensive job. Most colleagues I know have had to start therapy over the last few years."

The "profits before lives" policy of the federal and state governments in the COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences for Karolin. "I provide music and singing lessons," she said. "This was prohibited until April this year. I therefore gave private lessons at a music school, but I had to do them online. I was very unwell during all that time. I couldn't practice my profession; I couldn't do that at all for two years. I felt useless and meaningless."

Karolin is critical of the fact that the interests of children were not considered in any way in drawing up the pandemic policies--neither medically, nor psychologically. "Attention should have been paid to the children," she said. "The parents had to do so much work while they were supposed to look after the children. Children have suffered great psychological damage from the last few years."

Instead, the profits of the capitalist oligarchs were the focus. "Our work does not make a profit, except that we educate new workers," Karolin said. "It was immediately clear that Lufthansa would be rescued with billions [in public funds]. So much money was flowing into big business.

"But not even air filters were installed at schools—that's where you can see the government's priorities. So far, nothing has improved under the SPD-Left Party-Green state government. There is little hope that anything will change. We would need a real lobby."

When SGP members explained that the unions have played a

key role in isolating and selling out working class struggles along sectoral and national lines for decades, Karolin said, “I only joined the union this week, and only because I’m not being paid properly. There are so many categories of teachers, I don’t understand that. I also don’t understand why the hurdles between the different federal states are so high.”

Asked about building rank-and-file action committees that do not enter into secret negotiations with the employers’ side and are independent of the national unions, Karolin said, “The idea sounds great. But many of my colleagues are so tired after work that they just fall into bed. Everyone is so overworked; many still have families themselves.”

Karolin agreed with the need for an international movement of the whole working class against austerity, social cuts, the war and the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another participant in the warning strike, who has been working at a primary school in Berlin for four years and wished to remain anonymous, told us: “In the last few years our classes have doubled in size. This is always decided at short notice before the holidays. My concern is to finally put a stop to this. Classes are already too big. Class sizes should be reduced, the timetables shortened, and more space created for games and projects.”

According to this teacher, the pandemic could have shown that other forms of teaching and care were possible. “When we worked in small classes in the period after the lockdowns, the children had fewer lessons but still learned more than before. As an educator, one was more satisfied with one’s teaching because we could respond to everyone, and everyone could follow along. This showed me that it’s not the amount of teaching, but the class size. Smaller classes would be the key to everyone’s satisfaction.”

Her colleague added, “From the political side, learning is not the priority. This has been clearly demonstrated in the pandemic. Children are just to be looked after so that parents can work. The parents are supposed to be available for work. The interests of the children are not paramount.”

SGP members also spoke to Viktoria, a salaried teacher in Berlin who comes from Russia, and Ievgeniia, who fled Ukraine to Germany in March and has been working as a teacher in a welcome class in Berlin since April. “We need smaller classes, more teachers, more and better premises,” they said. “We have 25 to 28 children.”

Viktoria added: “The parents have been good in the pandemic so far and the school management has tried to protect us. But now people are much more relaxed, even though some of the numbers are much higher. That does worry me. I have two children, which is very problematic. You reach your limits when you have to work and the children want attention at the same time. You can’t double up. You are left alone without help. Teachers and children were sick. You can’t teach online and offline at the same time.”

She continued: “In school, it’s all about supervision,

supervising the children. You run back and forth between two classes by yourself. You have to be an events manager and a nurse at the same time.

“We also need medical staff. There is a lack of people everywhere. You try to help everywhere, but you get worn out from that.

“If you build schools, you don’t need prisons and wars. Education is everything. I also worked for a while in a secondary school in Moabit, at a university and at a grammar school, but it wasn’t any better there. There are also a lot of people missing at the universities. Some doctoral students must get by on 600 euros a month and don’t get contracts. You have to choose between a career and children.”

Ievgeniia, who learned German in Ukraine, nodded and said, “I’m also in favour of having a nurse in the school. In the Soviet Union there was always a doctor and nurse. We can’t compensate for all that. In Russia and Ukraine, our professions are paid even less.”

Viktoria and Ievgeniia agreed that the US and German governments were trying to set workers in Russia and Ukraine against each other.

“What are we supposed to think?” asked Viktoria. “It’s terrible. It’s not good for all sides. I don’t know what’s happening up there. I haven’t seen my family for years because people with a Sputnik vaccination were not allowed to enter Europe. What has been done to Ukraine is even worse. It’s a disaster for the people down here. That the children are growing up with hatred... How are we supposed to live together in the future? I don’t know who cooked up this mess. Someone definitely benefits, but not us.”

*The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei will turn the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives into a referendum against war and austerity. Its youth organisation, IYSSE, is hosting an international online event on Saturday 10 December to launch a mass global youth movement against the war in Ukraine and the threat of a third world war. Register for the event and contact us to participate in building independent action committees in your schools and institutions.*



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