

German postal workers ready to strike

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Contract negotiations for almost 11 million workers in various sectors in Germany are on the agenda this year. The first round will start at Deutsche Post AG. The approximately 160,000 workers in parcel and letter delivery and other areas in Germany have made it clear they will not be fobbed off like in the last round of collective bargaining. They have forced service union Verdi to demand 15 percent more pay and €200 more per month for apprentices and dual students (those studying at university as well as undertaking workplace practice).

At the start of negotiations last Friday, Deutsche Post management, led by Frank Appel, rejected the more than justified demands and made no offer of its own. At the same time, 15 percent more money would not even compensate for the loss in real wages of the last three years and the current official inflation rate of around 9 percent; especially not if the costs of food and energy, on which working families spend a large part of their income, are taken into account, where price increases amount to between 20 and 50 percent.

In September 2020, postal workers had demonstrated their willingness to fight. But Verdi stifled the industrial action, although 22,000 had already taken part in warning strikes before the third round of negotiations alone. This was followed by the Verdi bargaining commission agreeing a contract imposing severe real wage cuts on postal workers.

In the first seven months, wages and salaries did not increase at all, then by 3 percent on January 1, 2021 and by another 2 percent on January 1, 2022. Verdi gave the Deutsche Post almost two and a half years of industrial peace in agreeing a contract period of 28 months. Before that, it had praised postal workers for months as “coronavirus heroes” because their workloads in the pandemic grew to unbearable levels.

Now, too, Verdi will do everything to avoid industrial action. The collective bargaining round had started in

October and November last year with a members’ survey. Over 43,000 Verdi members took part, more than ever before. In the run-up, Verdi had already tried to lower expectations and asked how members felt about a 10 percent pay demand, but 65 percent of the members rejected this as too low, and 91 percent agreed to strike for their demands!

This led Verdi to table the current demands. Currently, company meetings and smaller rallies are taking place in several cities, where workers are underlining their willingness to fight—like 1,500 workers from the greater Frankfurt area on Monday.

As expected, the Deutsche Post board itself considers compensation for the real wage cuts suffered to be “unrealistic.” A company spokesperson said a balance had to be struck between wage increases and economic viability, otherwise jobs were at risk. “Already today, the clearly declining results in the postal and parcel business are no longer sufficient for the necessary investments,” the spokesperson said.

The “declining result” last year was a profit of €1.35 billion in parcel and letter deliveries alone. In total, Deutsche Post can record at least €8.4 billion in profits in 2022; it was €8 billion in 2021. But the money is not supposed to go to those who risk ruining their health for it in their daily work, but to shareholders and managers. Last year, Deutsche Post paid its shareholders €2.2 billion in dividends. And Deutsche Post boss Appel collects around €10 million a year, making him the best-paid CEO of a DAX-listed company in 2020.

While the Deutsche Post board members are raking it in, they refuse to pay the tax-free bonus of €3,000 that the federal government has made available to the collective bargaining parties to keep percentage increases and thus real wages low. The billion-euro dividend for shareholders would not be reduced by the €480 million that this payment to workers would cost

on a one-off basis.

Postal workers are to continue bleeding in the interest of the shareholders. In 1995, big business and the cabinet had converted Deutsche Post into a public limited company and floated it on the stock exchange. Like air and rail transport and the health system, the postal service and telecommunications are being broken up, filleted, and privatised more and more. As a result, Deutsche Post, and its subsidiaries, like DHL Delivery, are competing mercilessly with Amazon, DPD, FedEx, UPS, Hermes, GLS and other logistics companies at the expense of the workers. Most postal workers are among Germany's low earners, receiving significantly less than the average wage.

Deutsche Post, on the other hand, is one of the biggest winners of the crisis; it has profited enormously from the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting increase in parcel volumes over the past three years—at the expense of workers' health and lives. Workloads increased tremendously with the beginning of the pandemic and were further intensified by several internal organisational changes. The sickness rate is high, sometimes almost one in five employees is absent, and overtime accumulates daily.

As in social care and nurseries, many are leaving the company and the entire sector. According to Verdi negotiator Andrea Kocsis, "Workers urgently need compensation for inflation and they also expect a share in the company's success." A "permanent financial recognition for their work" was overdue.

Two and a half years ago, the highly paid Verdi official had shown what she meant by this. As a union negotiator in September 2020, she had claimed that the collective agreement imposing cuts in real wages would bring "a sustained wage increase, security and perspective for employees."

The Deutsche Post board knows it can rely on Verdi in this contract bargaining round as well. Andrea Kocsis, Stephan Teuscher (Verdi's head of collective bargaining policy in the department of postal services, forwarding and logistics), as well as numerous other Verdi functionaries and union representatives on the works councils, sit on the supervisory board of Deutsche Post AG or DHL Post Group and collect five-figure sums (Kocsis was paid €264,000 in 2021).

Despite differing positions, a Deutsche Post spokesperson said they expected progress would be

made in the next round of negotiations "in fair and speedy talks." The bargaining parties will meet again on January 18 and 19, and the third round is scheduled for February 9.

Until then, Verdi will call on postal workers to participate in warning strikes and organise protests to let off steam but will do everything to prevent an indefinite strike. Verdi, like the other unions, is a member of the corporatist "Concerted Action," in which Chancellor Olaf Scholz has brought together business and trade union representatives to pass the costs of the pandemic, inflation and the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine onto the working population.

Verdi must not be allowed to stab postal workers in the back again, as it did in 2020. A successful struggle by postal workers would set an important course for the coming collective bargaining disputes. Contract bargaining for 2.8 million workers in the federal and municipal public sector starts at the end of January, in February for just under 120,000 rail workers at Deutsche Bahn, then in March for the retail sector (2.6 million workers) and the auto industry (410,000), and in April for wholesale and foreign trade (1.2 million).

In all these struggles, workers are confronted with the opposition not only of the corporations and the government, but also of the trade unions. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) therefore calls on workers in all sectors to build a network of rank-and-file action committees independent of the unions. These are needed to defend wages and jobs and to reject all the policies of the ruling class: its criminal pandemic and war policies and the destruction of the education, health and welfare systems. The collective bargaining round at Deutsche Post should be used to drive this initiative forward.



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