

# Berlin refuse workers protest for higher wages: “We are ready to strike!”

Our reporters  
18 January 2023

On Tuesday, several hundred employees of the Berlin city sanitation department (BSR) gathered to hand over a petition to the management. More than half of the nearly 6,000 employees had signed the demand for a wage increase of 10.5 percent, or at least €500 per month for a period of twelve months.

Ulrich Rippert, a candidate of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) for the Berlin House of Representatives state election, attended the rally and spoke with workers.

The mood was combative. Many had driven up in their garbage trucks. The street in front of BSR headquarters in Berlin-Tempelhof was completely blocked. “We will block all of Berlin if they don’t meet our demand this time,” one worker shouted at a policeman who was trying in vain to direct traffic.

“This is the absolute bottom line, we have to fully enforce this demand,” Mert said in an interview with Ulrich Rippert. He has worked for two and a half years in refuse collection, has a family, and his wife currently has no job. Rising inflation and high heating costs were very difficult for them, he said, and they could barely make ends meet.

Asked what he thought about the fact that 100—and soon maybe 300—billion euros were being spent on military rearmament and war, and yet there is supposedly no money for higher wages, Mert replied, “Yes, the war is bad. But let me put it this way, if the BSR boss here at our company can pay herself over €200,000, then our demand is certainly justified. Then we deserve more. And I personally feel it’s a slap in the face that this 10 percent has to be even discussed and negotiated at all.” For him and his colleagues, the 10.5 percent or €500 more per month is therefore “the real minimum.”

Rippert spoke with an older worker holding a rolled-

up Verdi union flag in his hand—there were few union flags to be seen but most were in a pile on the side of the road. He said, “I’ve seen your election posters. I have three children. I want to get rid of this red-green-red [SPD, Green Party, Left Party] state government. Weapons don’t create peace! You only have to think of 2002 and Joschka Fischer. The Greens were already warmongering back then. What is happening now in Lützerath is real satire. The Greens have already mined [all the coal] there for years and now they send in the police.”

Asked about the Ukraine war and military build-up, he said, “I’m against the sanctions and against the arms shipments, I always speak out against war. The price increases and inflation always hit the little people; they are a kind of war taxes. A millionaire doesn’t care if butter gets more expensive.”

He did not think much of the Verdi trade union. “Verdi is organized like a company, it’s even legally a limited liability company. It has to pay for its headquarters and so on. Verdi actually has nothing to do with a real trade union. It’s very much on the Social Democrat’s coattails, just like the DGB [German Union Confederation] as a whole. That’s why I don’t think much of the DGB. I am now forced to join Verdi. They are very toothless; my son laughs his head off at the so-called warning strikes. They are announced in advance and then don’t even cost the company any money because we simply don’t get paid for the day and have to rework everything later.”

He would totally support a general strike, “but the general strike principle is forbidden in Germany.”

Another worker, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, said, “When we talk about rearmament and inflation at work, I always tell my colleagues, ‘That’s your money that’s going down the

drain, too.’ But you have to be careful what you say. If you make your opinion known—which should be everyone’s democratic right—it can happen that you get called to see your supervisor. This company in particular is very behind the times—and so is the union. Shop stewards log on to social media under fake names, pretend to support actions or movements from below—and then they have you by the collar.”

He liked the SGP’s proposal to build rank-and-file action committees to break Verdi’s control and link up with workers in other cities and countries.

A colleague standing next to him, who has family ties to the Middle East, said, “What’s happening now in Ukraine, they’ve already done with Afghanistan and Iraq. What were German soldiers doing in Afghanistan? If each army would stay in its country and the rich countries didn’t want the mineral resources of the other countries, there would be no war. We the workers—that is, this class here—we are then supposed to pay for the whole thing.”

Refuse workers have always formed a militant bloc in the public sector unions. But in this industrial struggle, a conflict with the leadership of Verdi is developing from the very beginning. In view of the rapid price increases and growing discontent in many companies, Verdi felt compelled to survey its members as early as September on a pay demand.

A total of 200,000 took part, 97 percent of whom were in favour of a significantly higher wage demand. At the time, BSR employees demanded 16 percent more pay and declared their “full willingness to strike.” In meetings and discussions Verdi then constantly pushed for the demand to be reduced to the current level of 10.5 percent, with at least €500 euros per month for a contract term of twelve months.

This does not even cover the loss in real wages of the last two years, which amount to more than 12 percent. In 2020, Verdi officials had agreed to a contract increasing pay by a total of just 3.2 percent over a period of 28 months. Even if the new demand were to be implemented in full, real incomes would still fall by at least 10 percent in the coming year relative to 2020.

But the Verdi bureaucracy has not the slightest intention of fighting even for this slimmed-down minimum demand. On the contrary, it is part of a united front with the Berlin Senate (state executive) and the federal government, which is determined to impose the

costs of military rearmament, the Ukraine war and the sanctions against Russia onto public sector workers and the entire working class.

This is why the SGP’s election campaign in Berlin is so important.

The SGP election statement emphasizes that workers are stronger than the union apparatuses, corporations and governments. They produce all the wealth of society and keep it going under the most difficult conditions. To unleash their power, they must organize in independent action committees that unite internationally and link the struggle for secure jobs and good wages with the fight against war. The SGP is therefore linking its election campaign with an offensive for such action committees.

We demand:

- Life instead of profits!
- Defend all jobs! 30 percent more wages for all and automatic compensation for inflation!
- Expropriation without compensation of the rent sharks, energy companies, war profiteers!

These demands cannot be realized by appealing to the ruling elite and their political representatives, because all capitalist parties stand behind the war and social devastation. Workers need their own party!

The election statement ends with the words, “It is time to take action and build a new mass socialist party that will eliminate the evils of capitalism once and for all. We call on everyone who does not want to accept social inequality, the destruction of the health and education systems, and the nuclear annihilation of our planet: Share this statement as widely as possible, inform and mobilize family, friends and colleagues, support our campaign and vote SGP on February 12!”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**