

Berlin public sector “warning strikes”: The trade unions and state executive want to push through a wage reduction

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Ahead of the elections to the Berlin House of Representatives (state legislature), industrial action by nursing and care staff is developing in the German capital, coinciding with a rapidly growing wave of strikes at an international level. While hundreds of thousands are striking against the war policies and austerity dictates of the Macron and Sunak governments in France and the UK, in the next few days, thousands of public sector workers in Berlin—including at hospitals and city sanitation services—will also go on strike against the biggest cuts in real wages since the Second World War.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) fully supports the strikes. We demand 30 percent more pay and full compensation for inflation for all public sector workers! Nurses have exerted superhuman efforts in run-down hospitals over the last three years to mitigate the effects of the “profits before lives” policy in the pandemic and to save lives. Many died themselves in the process. Refuse collectors and other workers also maintain vital public services daily in ever worse conditions.

Now, the real incomes of these workers are to be reduced as well! According to the official figures of the Federal Statistical Office, the increase in consumer prices for food and energy is currently 20.7 percent and 24.4 percent, respectively, compared to the same month last year, with energy prices even higher. For Berlin, analyses by Immowelt have shown that rental prices in the city doubled between 2009 and 2019 and have been growing ever faster since. All this means massive cuts in real wages.

While workers are being exploited ever more harshly in this way, the corporations listed on Germany’s DAX

index are posting record profits. At the same time, billions are being spent on armaments and war. The constant escalation of the Ukraine war by NATO and the federal government is driving up inflation even further.

The wage cuts can only be stopped if workers take real industrial action and unite with their brothers and sisters in France, Britain and across Europe. Workers everywhere face the same problems and are confronted with the same reckless policies and can therefore only fight back together. The struggle for decent wages must be linked to the struggle against the war policy of every government. This is what the SGP is standing for in the Berlin elections.

To wage such a struggle, public sector workers must organise themselves into rank-and-file action committees independent of the Verdi union and take the strike into their own hands. This is because Verdi does not represent the interests of workers but collaborates closely with the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party, who control the Berlin Senate (state executive) in a so-called “red-red-green” coalition, to push through real wage cuts. Even if Verdi were to achieve its demand of 10.5 percent more pay over a 12-month period, this would still mean painful losses in purchasing power. And, in fact, the union has long since agreed to much lower settlements in backroom talks.

Verdi has been making pacts with the Senate parties for decades to grind down workers’ rights. After billions were raised to bail out the Berliner Bankgesellschaft in 2002, the Senate and the union organised a 10 percent wage cut in the public sector, spinning off subsidiaries at hospitals and extending

teachers' working hours.

To intensify its collaboration with the Senate parties and to support them in the election campaign, Verdi organised a choreographed "strike meeting" in eastern Berlin on Friday, attended by about 200 union members and delegates from the Berlin sanitation department, various hospitals and utilities. Following a carefully planned "demands workshop," Verdi secretary Dana Lützkendorf shared a podium with the top candidates from the Christian Democrats (CDU), Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Left Party, as well as leading Green and SPD state parliamentarians.

In reality, it was a PR event for the "Red-Red-Green" governing parties in the Senate, which have been destroying Berlin's social infrastructure for decades. The Verdi representatives called on the politicians to support the union's wage demands and to commit to bringing the Charité and Vivantes hospital subsidiaries back into public ownership, which they themselves had spun off together with the Senate.

While things are boiling up in the workforce, Verdi is trying to release pressure with the planned "warning strikes"—little more than protests to blow off steam—and then push through the next round of cuts in real wages. The union is totally hostile to mounting serious industrial action and, to this end, isolating current warning strikes by airport workers, striking teachers and others. Even more so, it seeks to isolate them from public sector workers in France and Britain, who are striking and demonstrating en masse.

Workers are meeting this with resistance. Even at the orchestrated Verdi meeting, workers expressed their opposition to the cut in real wages and their willingness to fight to the WSWS and in conversation with SGP members.

An intensive care nurse at the Vivantes hospital in Spandau described it as a "contradiction in terms" that the Left Party's lead candidate Klaus Lederer, as the head of one of the three governing parties in the Berlin Senate, had pretended to support the strikers' demands. She stated: "We have been disappointed beyond measure by all parties. The 100 billion euros [for the armed forces] must go to care and education. We need young people. The money for rearmament comes from social sectors and that's where it should be returned."

"I'm dying every day," says Louisa, who is an intensive care nurse in a surgical intensive care unit at

the Charité's Virchow Clinic. She describes how, for reasons of cost, deceased patients are "simply pushed into the corridor so that the bed is free. These things are completely inhumane and undignified, but very conducive to a capitalist health system. You get at least one slap in the face every day as a nurse. I'm very frustrated."

"The conditions in nursing are no longer sustainable for me and my conscience," reports Joshua, who quit during his training. "I had to care for people in a way that is not good, and people are suffering because of this. Higher wages are important, but this is only one point of a much bigger problem. As a trainee, I had to care for my own patients, and far too many—not in the way they needed to be cared for. I didn't manage to keep it up."

As in Berlin, resentment is growing throughout Germany and across the continent. It is crucial to unite these struggles, to wrest them from the control of the trade unions and to link them to the struggle against war, which is further intensifying the social attacks. Get in touch with us to build independent action committees and support the SGP's campaign for the House of Representatives. Send a WhatsApp message to +49 1573 4683047.



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