

4,000 teachers take part in warning strike in Berlin as mistrust of GEW trade union grows

Gregor Link, Carola Kleinert
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Around 4,000 teachers, as well as social pedagogues and school psychologists took part Tuesday in a warning strike in Berlin, Germany, called by the Education and Scholarship Union (GEW). A demonstration led from Friedrichstrasse station to Alexanderplatz in front of the Rote Rathaus (Red City Hall). Spokesman for the GEW appealed to finance senator Daniel Wesener (Greens) to enter into negotiations on “binding regulations for class sizes in schools and vocational colleges.”

Due to the widespread indignation among teachers about the unsustainable conditions in the schools and the far too large classes, the GEW has been forced to hold protest actions eight times in recent months. On Wednesday, the union announced further “decentralized actions,” including panel discussions with education policy spokespersons from the parties represented in the Berlin State House of Representatives. The GEW is appealing for better working conditions, reduced workloads and a “collective agreement on health protection” in order to “set the course for smaller classes step by step.”

However, the unchecked spread of the coronavirus, which is still killing over 100 people every day in Germany alone, was not mentioned by the GEW—even though the unprotected congregation of children from hundreds of households in unventilated school buildings has been proven to be a factor driving the pandemic.

Members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) took part in the strike march and campaigned among teachers for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, which would withdraw the negotiating mandate from the GEW and connect with striking teachers in other countries. The SGP is the only party that opposes the war in Ukraine. Among other things, it calls for the redirection of the German army (Bundeswehr) special fund of €100 billion towards education and health budgets and is fighting to unify and expand internationally strikes by teachers, post workers, nurses and refuse workers currently taking place in Berlin.

In conversation with the SGP, strikers advanced further

demands, criticized the divisive role of the GEW and condemned the austerity policies of the SPD/Green/Left Party state government, the so-called red-green-red senate, with which the GEW is closely linked.

“The training does not in any way prepare teachers for the day-to-day profession,” said Peter, who has been working as an employed teacher at a Berlin grammar school since 2014 and teaches Latin and English there. “With the practical semester, this has gotten a little better, but you would have to be brought into this profession much more actively from the beginning so that prospective teachers can see whether they have the strength to manage it. If more people got a taste of the profession, the overall completion rate would be higher, even if many drop out. But the long unpaid full-time study scares many. If you don’t have rich parents, you have a slim chance of studying because it’s impossible to work while you’re at it.”

Peter responded to the provocative push by the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) to “remedy” the shortage of teachers by increasing teachers’ workloads: “Many teachers are part-time, because there is no other way. They can’t reconcile it with their conscience to work ‘full-time,’ because then you can’t do justice to the students. It would make the teaching even worse. We want the classes to be smaller and we want to be able to take more care of the individual students. If the timetables were reduced, we could also work full-time. But it can’t be normal for every second person to say, ‘I can’t do the job if I don’t reduce my hours.’”

“During the pandemic, I learned that most students need really close supervision,” Peter continued. “Uploading and requesting tasks is not enough and even the very good students face problems.” On the German tank deliveries to the Ukrainian military and the rearmament of the Bundeswehr, Peter said: “What is to be positive about this? No one wants war. I am convinced that the arms deliveries will further escalate the war.”

Marianna, 59, works at a Europe school and called for compensation for all teachers who can’t get tenure because

of their age. “Although I still have to work until 2030, I can’t get tenure as a civil servant as I’m over 50. A compensation payment of €300 can only be obtained if you work full-time, which almost no one can do. At our Europe school, the lessons are shorter at just 40 minutes, but a full-time position includes 32 lessons per week. Nobody does that.” If the situation does not change, she will only receive a pension of 40 percent of her last net salary instead of a 70 percent pension for tenured civil servants, Marianna reported. “Many of my colleagues are not from Europe, but from South America—Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina—they can’t get tenure, no matter how old they are,” she continued.

A teacher who wanted to remain anonymous reported on her attempt to “network” employee teachers with those who have tenure as civil servants in order to end the unequal treatment and the “two-class society in the staff room.” When she and other colleagues approached the responsible GEW representative with this intention, he reacted dismissively and “tried to hold us back with excuses,” she said.

Anne teaches several welcome classes with children from different backgrounds. “You have to give children the space they need to experience things for themselves,” she said. “For this purpose, the number of lessons and the class sizes must be reduced. In many classes, two teachers would be needed. There are also too few practice rooms in the schools to apply what has been learned. Moreover, the curriculums have not been changed for decades.” Anne previously worked in adult education for several years, explaining that the families of many children have fled from war and poverty, “from Ukraine, from Syria, from Ghana....”

Asked about her “Free Assange” badge, Anne criticized the war policies of the NATO countries and said: “I am in favour of the release of Julian Assange. He is imprisoned for publishing secret documents about corruption and war crimes. Politicians should be interested in the good of all, but instead they pursue the power interests of a few. That has to change. In Ukraine and around the world, negotiations must be the first means of choice. So many other things could be financed from the money for the rearmament of the Bundeswehr. Anyone who produces weapons will eventually use them. And then there are more deaths and more misery.”

Several teachers reacted angrily to the policy of the Berlin Senate. “This wrong policy has been going on for several years,” commented one teacher. “That’s why we have these big problems in education.” Another added that she is “totally disappointed” by the governing parties and feels “really fooled.” Martina B., who has been in the civil service for 11 years and works at a primary school in Neukölln, said: “I feel like I’m in the wrong movie! I never thought

we’d be discussing tank deliveries again today.”

Michaela worked in a theatre but is now part of a career conversion programme to become a teacher. In addition to her teacher training, she already works at an elementary school in JüL (multi-year learning). “It’s supposedly about children of different ages helping each other,” she explained. “But this only works if you have smaller classes in which you can respond to all children. For the teachers, it is an insane challenge—a nice idea, but in its current form it leaves many children stranded.

“Instead of 28 children, there should be no more than 22. The less the better, every single place would be great. It was best with partitioned classes during COVID. Teachers often work into the evening, but many are unaware of this. It is unrealistic and an immense effort to catch up on training as part of a career conversion. Already in my studies, which I have to do by the way, there are people who show burnout symptoms. Those who still have children themselves and have to catch up on their studies simply do not manage this burden.

“There has been so much money going into the military over the last few decades, I wonder what was funded by it. I think education needs a lot more support and a lot more money. Spaces must be created, more personnel must be hired—including pedagogical assistants, afternoon training and so on. With the €100 billion, one could also create housing and space for young people.

“I’m not really a friend of the GEW. I was there for only a few months and got out again exactly because they don’t stand firm, and it should be about fighting together with others and getting things done together. Not every profession can walk alone. A GEW speaker recently said: ‘We want to bake bigger rolls.’ But I personally am not interested in more money at all, but in making social changes in various areas. The fact that the current strikes are so decentralized is therefore extremely strange to me.”



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