

Public sector warning strikes in Germany: “We should be aware of our power”

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On Thursday, the German United Services Union (Vereinigte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, or Verdi) called for one-day warning strikes in the municipal public sectors. In the states of Berlin, Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia, employees in public transport, municipal administrations, daycare, hospitals and waste disposal took part. On Friday, employees in the state of Baden-Württemberg were likewise on strike.

This is Verdi's response to the rising tide of anger in municipal agencies, institutions and companies whose budgets have been cut to the bone. In the ongoing collective bargaining negotiations for over 2.5 million employees, Verdi is only demanding wage and salary increases of 10.5 percent with a minimum €500 per month for a 12-month contract. Allowances for trainees are to be increased €200 per month.

In the first round of negotiations, the state employers, represented by the Mayor of Gelsenkirchen, Karin Welge (Social Democratic Party, SPD), and Federal Minister of the Interior Nancy Faeser (also SPD), brusquely rejected these demands. Namely, they want no increase in wages at all, and this with food and energy prices up 20 to 30 percent.

In Berlin, a good 2,000 employees convened on Thursday morning for the central rally near the House of Representatives, mainly garbage collectors of the city cleaning service (BSR), nurses from Charité and Vivantes hospitals, as well as employees of the Berlin water company. The BSR employees appeared demonstratively in orange work clothes, specifically because the BSR board had wanted to forbid them from striking so dressed.

But while the workers were militant, Verdi tried to turn the demonstration into a promotional event for the political parties in the House of Representatives. The union invited hated members of parliament from the SPD, the Greens, the Left, the FDP and the CDU so that they could present themselves at the rally as supporters of the demand for wage increases. The workers were visibly surprised and refused to greet the representatives of the parties when called to do so by the Verdi spokeswoman. Green Party parliament member

Silke Gebel was even met with boos and whistles. “I’m a member of Verdi myself,” she shouted in exasperation.

It is probable that the majority of the members of the House of Representatives are members of Verdi or another trade union. After all, Verdi does not represent the interests of workers but has for decades been acting with Senate parties to whittle down workers’ wages and rights.

Cuts in real wages have long been agreed to in backroom deals and Verdi's demand means a 10 to 20 percent loss of purchasing power. In order to push this through, in the face of the enormous anger among employees and without inciting a massive mobilization, Verdi and other unions are dividing the workers. Thus, on Monday Verdi called for postal workers to strike, on Tuesday and Wednesday the education union GEW called out the teachers, now on Thursday and Friday Verdi is calling out workers from the public sector.

The role that Verdi plays was pointed out by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, the German section of the Fourth International) candidate in the Berlin election, Ulrich Rippert, in his speech addressed to the strikers. In it, he explained that the strike must be undertaken as part of a European strike and protest movement and called for the formation of rank-and-file committees that take the strike into their own hands, independently of the unions.

Members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei spoke to strikers in Berlin and distributed the SGP's election statement and a leaflet from the Transport Workers' Rank-and-File Committee in support of the SGP.

Sara, Nick and Amelie are third-year apprentices at Charité and Vivantes Hospitals. They reject Germany's military buildup and austerity policies and are demanding real wage increases. “I was paying 35 euro for electricity a year ago, now it's 110 euro,” Nick explained. “How are you supposed to finance that on a trainee salary? Although I'm lucky enough to share an apartment, I'm massively overdrafted.” Sara said, “I still live at home, but I support my parents and I also notice that a lot of things are no longer affordable. Among older colleagues, you can sense the mood

even more clearly.”

All three began their training in October 2020 in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. “Entire wards were closed to patients infected with the coronavirus, and many other patients could not be admitted,” Nick said. “It was difficult to be integrated into the teams because there were too few of us on the wards anyway, and then there were so many absences due to coronavirus. As a result, we didn’t always have supervision. When we were assigned to long-term care, we had to supervise entire residence areas by ourselves. You feel very much left on your own.”

“The whole apprenticeship is running badly, from beginning to end, especially with the new Nursing Professions Act (Pflegerberufegesetz),” said Amelie. “We have generalist training, which is three training courses in one. But it’s all very superficial. How are you supposed to work in the hospital if you’ve never prepared an infusion? The pediatric part only lasts three weeks, and then you can call yourself a pediatric nurse. But at the same time, we have to work in a nursing home for a whole year, doing everything on our own. That doesn’t make any sense. In my second year of training, I was responsible for 15 patients on my own. Beyond that, there is no agreement between the school and the employer, which we all feel. When we asked politicians about the law in the House of Representatives, we were told to our faces that we were ‘the guinea pigs.’”

Julien and Kira are first-year apprentices at Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG, transportation services) and are taking part in a strike for the first time. “There are a lot of people who don’t make enough to live on,” Julien said. “It’s especially difficult for those who, like Kira, have to support their families. I still live at home, fortunately, but my mother doesn’t have much money either.” Kira criticized the fact that subcontractors have been used at BVG for years to massively cut wages, and reported, “After deducting rent, I only have 170 euro for the month.”

Regarding the proxy war between Russia and NATO powers in Ukraine, Julien said, “I think it’s terrible how oil is being poured on the fire by our government. It’s important to stop the war, but you don’t do that by supplying weapons.”

Many students are supporting the strikes and participated in the rally. Tabea, who studies education, said, “I came to the strike out of solidarity because I am very concerned about the poor working conditions and wages in the public sector and especially in the social sectors. If it goes on like this, everything will go down the drain.”

“Ten percent more pay sounds good at first and sounds like a lot of money,” said Michael, who works at BSR. But he is suspicious. “Given inflation, we can’t be satisfied ‘meeting in the middle’ at 5 percent. If it’s then stretched

out over several years, we’re looking at 2 to 3 percent. I don’t understand why more shouldn’t be possible. You should go into negotiations with demands twice as high.”

Michael was previously employed as a temporary worker at BMW where he learned “that business and politics work in exactly the same way, and that turned me off.

“It makes me angry that only the big corporations are supported by the government. During the coronavirus pandemic it became clear that laws could be easily changed and overturned as needed. Since then BMW has been making huge profits, which are proudly reported at company meetings. But no one new is being hired.”

Public sector workers are in an especially powerful position, Michael said: “The garbage collection company would only have to stop working for two weeks, then we would have the 10 percent. I think we should be aware of our power. But a lot of those at the top of the unions are only interested in sucking up to the employers so they can take more home themselves. It sucks.”

Michael laments the growing gap between rich and poor: “It’s obvious they want to butter us up. They can take the energy assistance payment and shove it—these one-time payments won’t make us better off in the future.”

“We have countless problems on this earth,” he continued. “Currently, it’s the war in Ukraine, but it can get much worse. The US and Germany are supplying weapons to Ukraine and profiting massively from it. It doesn’t look like the war will end in the next few years. I think that, in a sense, a third world war has already begun. Where do you draw the line? Already all of Europe is involved in Ukraine, as is the United States. There is also the threat of war in China and the whole East.”

Michael said he will vote for the SGP on Sunday. “You definitely have my vote, and I hope there will be many more. Your posters are the only ones that appealed to me. I can’t stand the contentless phrases on the other posters anymore. You chose the right topics and make the right demands. Now it’s a matter of fighting for them. For that, we definitely need a mass movement. We have to understand that we can all achieve something together.”



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