Warning strikes in Germany's public sector: "There is something wrong with the system itself"

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Many tens of thousands of public sector workers took part in warning strikes in Germany last week. What they all have in common is anger over a provocative offer from the federal and municipal governments that would mean a massive cut in real wages. At the same time, there is growing dissatisfaction with the service sector union Verdi, which wants to avoid joint, effective industrial action taking place at all costs.

Last Friday's nationwide local transit workers' strike was followed by further warning strikes at municipal cleaning companies, water utilities and public hospitals. On Wednesday, a strike in social and educational services paralysed nurseries in almost all federal states, and on Thursday and Friday, Berlin refuse workers went on strike again, as did Munich swimming pool lifeguards, Hamburg harbour and stage workers, and many more. Hospitals, psychiatric clinics, nursing homes and ambulance services are to go on strike Tuesday and Wednesday.

The offer made by the federal and local governments on February 23 is a provocation. According to this, there will only be a 3 percent increase at the end of the year, and in total, wages will only increase by 5 percent within 27 months. Even two one-off payments totalling €2,500 cannot change the fact that such an agreement would lead to a clear reduction in real wages, given the level of inflation affecting food, petrol, heating, housing, etc. The service workers union Verdi is calling for a wage increase of only 3 percent.

Verdi is not prepared to mobilise all 2.5 million public service workers in a joint struggle. On the contrary, it is doing everything in its power to prevent this. The recent agreement at local transit operator Hamburger Hochbahn gives a foretaste of the kind of sellout Verdi leaders are preparing with their Social Democratic Party (SPD) colleagues from the federal and local governments. The conflict at Deutsche Post also shows that Verdi is sticking to negotiations in order to avoid a strike by postal workers, despite them voting by 86 percent for strike action.

As a result, more and more workers are joining the independent Postal Workers Action Committee, which is opposing a sellout by Verdi and is thus beginning to take the strike into its own hands. This committee understands the conflict as part of a European-wide movement of workers against the consequences of war, inflation, the devastation of social provisions and job cuts.

In the conflict, Verdi stands on the side of big business and government, not the workers. The union fears above all that a strike at Deutsche Post could encourage public sector workers to take all-out strike action as well, and that this could develop into a powerful movement like the one in France and elsewhere against wage theft, social cuts and pro-war policies. This fear is well founded.

Many public sector workers are watching developments at Deutsche Post with great interest, as in France. At the same time, there is growing scepticism about the union's stalling and divisive tactics. This was noted by WSWS reporters who were able to speak with strikers in social and educational services on Wednesday. On that day alone, about 70,000 kindergarten teachers and social workers took part in strikes in Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Lower Saxony, Bremen, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.

Monika, a kindergarten teacher in Stuttgart, said she was in no way convinced that Verdi was serious about pushing through the current demand—for a 10.5 percent rise and at least €500 a month for a 12-month term: "I don't see any determination on Verdi's part to really fight for it." Whenever she asked her works council representatives, she was put off, being told, "We should always be patient, and supposedly we can only win something step by step. But that doesn't help us out of the rapidly rising inflation."

Monika reported on the staff shortage at her kindergarten, where promises had been made so many times that more staff would finally be hired. "In reality, the staffing level has been reduced from year to year. And even if we were to

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actually get the 10.5 percent, it wouldn't make much difference given the ever-increasing prices."

"We should all just be on the streets now," said striking kindergarten teachers who work at the Goetheschule school children's home in Mühlheim and had come to Frankfurt together. "We look after 160 schoolchildren and today the whole facility is closed. All or none, otherwise you don't achieve anything."

They also made it clear that many strikers see a connection between the provocative offer and the government's new pro-war course, in which the coalition of the SPD-Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens in Berlin is pouring well over €100 billion into the Bundeswehr (armed forces). "We don't think much about that at all," said a kindergarten teacher from the group in Mühlheim. "We are all against war here."

In Stuttgart, Bernd, an agricultural worker who took part in the warning strike, argued in a similar way. He explained that he had refused to be conscripted into military service: "Now you can see from the profits of heavy industry who benefits from all this." Bernd said he, too, would support a joint struggle of workers from all sectors. "The rising prices and the labour shortage, that affects practically all professions. That shows that something is actually wrong in the system itself." He criticised the great level of social inequality: "It cannot be that many earn little, and few earn so much. That is a great injustice."

Commenting on the current strike movement in France, Bernd said that you could see from this "that the strike movement is developing precisely in those countries where capitalism is most deeply rooted. This is not only true in France, but also in England, the country where capitalism originated. Marx already said that the workers of all countries must unite. Socialism is an international question."

The strike ballot at Deutsche Post was followed with great sympathy in the public sector. What unites care workers, educators, transport and other workers with the postal workers is their growing anger at being applauded during the pandemic but now being forced to keep things running under impossible conditions. Despite work stress and acute staff shortages, they are being fobbed off with a pittance.

"For a while we were the centre of attention, everyone applauded. But that was quickly over," reported Elke, Martin, Tanja and Felix from Lebenshilfe Maintaunus in Frankfurt. At the non-profit association that supports disabled people, wages are being brought into line with the public sector collective agreement. "We absolutely need the 10.5 percent as a minimum, and for 12 months, not spread over two and a half years."

The staff shortages had not been reversed since the coronavirus pandemic, when many of the staff themselves fell ill, they said. Pay was simply too poor for that, given the tough shift work. "We find so few new people that we now have to book people through a recruitment agency," Tanja reported. She is fighting for their work to be "socially recognised, otherwise it will remain so difficult. If the funding is not right, where will it come from?"

The team of the Praunheimer Werkstätten (workshops for people with disabilities) in Frankfurt also made it clear that the situation in the disability aid sector was at its limit. "We have fewer and fewer people to look after more and more clients, so the daily workload for the staff is constantly increasing," said Jan, who has been with the organisation for around 30 years, and his colleague Mai. The sickness rate in their residential homes, workshops and school care has currently risen to 20 percent, he said. "A lot of us are sick because we just can't do it anymore."

The pandemic had already proved very exhausting, she said. "We worked in protective suits. Even when the workshops went into short-time working, the hostels continued to run. A lot of us had coronavirus. I don't know anyone who didn't get it, and that was despite vaccination," said Jan. "Then it started with the war, and everything got more expensive, but wages didn't go up."

Practically all the workers there were on the lower and middle pay grades, he said. "They still go home with only €3,500 after 15 or 18 years of service, and that's in a city like Frankfurt where rents are so expensive." The strikers made it clear that they need a real uplift in every respect now. "Our work is a service to the community. We support the children and parents every day."

In Stuttgart, two nurses said, "For three years, we coped with the coronavirus pandemic but didn't get a pay rise." They reported that only 10 instead of 14 people were permanently working in their area, "And almost all of them only part-time, because otherwise the workload would be unbearable." Of course, they earn even less, and pensions are an even bigger problem. "Under the current working conditions, I can't last until I'm 67," one said, "and with working part-time, old-age poverty is pre-programmed."

Both agreed that everyone should strike together, "Like in France. We should take an example from that! They are paralysing the whole country. Those at the top here are just having a laugh at our expense."

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