

New warning strikes in Germany's public sector

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Public sector workers in Germany are striking again this week. Hundreds of thousands have already stopped work, and virtually all federal states are affected. It is well known that kindergartens, hospitals, public utilities, public transport companies and administrative offices have long been working at their limit in the face of rampant staff shortages and cuts in real wages.

There is also growing anger at the service sector union Verdi, which does not want to organise an effective joint strike movement. Verdi officials may be making big speeches about the “frivolous” offer from the other side, but behind the scenes they are preparing a sell-out, as the example of Deutsche Post shows.

Postal workers voted 86 percent in favour of an indefinite strike in a ballot, but Verdi subsequently struck an agreement with the Deutsche Post board within hours. The Verdi negotiating committee has accepted a contract that is just as bad as the first offer, which workers overwhelmingly rejected.

“Underpaid, understaffed, overworked, overburdened”—with this hand-made poster, a social worker from Hesse summed up the general mood of public sector workers. For a fundamental improvement in their situation, social workers, educators, municipal employees, nurses in municipal hospitals, retirement homes and providing care for the disabled, as well as refuse collectors, streetcar drivers and many others went on strike yesterday.

While in Saxony there was a strike on Monday, in Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia Verdi called for a separate strike on Tuesday. Around 30,000 took part in three rallies in Gelsenkirchen, Monchengladbach, and Cologne. Another 20,000 took part in warning strikes in Baden-Württemberg on Wednesday, and there are to be further actions and a central rally in Leipzig on Friday.

In Berlin, staff at the Employment Agency and Job Centre were on strike on Wednesday, along with employees in vocational training and student services. On Thursday, the Berlin hospitals Charité, Vivantes and the Vivantes subsidiaries as well as the Jewish Hospital were again on strike.

Workers in the city's sanitation services and water companies were also set to strike on Thursday and Friday. Apprentices at various municipal companies and the local transport provider BVG also took part in the warning strike Thursday. Drivers are planning to strike March 27 together with EVG railroad workers, who are also in a wages dispute.

In Hamburg, Germany's largest port remained closed to large ships on Wednesday morning, as pilots remain on strike until Friday. Furthermore, workers on the Kiel Canal (NOK) at the locks in Kiel and Brunsbüttel are also to go on strike for the first time on Friday.

In Frankfurt on Wednesday, several thousand workers from the city's public utilities, nurseries, AWO nursing homes, Mainova (electricity and gas supplier) and the municipal transport company took part. The city appeared very quiet, as no streetcars or subway trains were running, and municipal offices were closed. About 2,000 strikers from the city and surrounding areas participated in a central rally in the city centre, in front of the headquarters of the employers' association (KAV).

Many of them felt that Verdi was demanding too little, while others expected at least the official demand would be enforced this time. This amounts to a 10.5 percent wage increase for a period of one year, with a minimum of €500 per month and €200 for apprentices.

In the second bargaining round, federal and local public sector employers rejected raising basic rates, something that would particularly benefit low-wage

earners. Instead, they are offering a total of 5 percent over 27 months, plus an additional one-time payment of €2,500. This does not come close to compensating for the loss in wages due to inflation and the pay freezes of recent years.

Ben, who works at Bad Nauheim's municipal utility provider, came to Frankfurt with his colleagues. "Above all, we need more money," Ben says. "Everything depends on that. We definitely need the ten percent for one year, that's what we're fighting for, and that's what we have to achieve." Low wages meant that hardly anyone was interested in the profession, and staff shortages were the result, he said.

This was confirmed by Kirsten, Merle, and Anna, three educators from a municipal after-school care centre in Mühlheim. "Improved conditions, better wages, more staff and good training," one said, then we could see further, that would be a start. Right now, we're all exhausted because there's a lack of staff, and it's getting worse."

Horst, who works for the city of Offenbach, thinks Verdi was asking for far too little. "Giving everyone a thousand euros more per month, that would be a start," Horst says. "Why is our work worth less than that of IT specialists and bankers?" But he has no confidence that Verdi will follow through: "What Verdi did at Deutsche Post was a breach of trust; they should have gone on strike."

An employee of the Offenbach Youth Welfare Office also agrees: "It's an outrage what happened at Deutsche Post office." But no one is talking about it, he says. "There, 86 percent voted for a strike, and then it's all concluded [by the union] very quickly." He suspects Verdi doesn't want a big strike at all. "Why don't we all strike together? We could really achieve something."

Many reacted with horror to information about the hasty deal struck at Deutsche Post, as did Steve, a social worker from Frankfurt. "We're fighting for higher wages and better working conditions here, after all," he says. At the moment, the situation is so tense that there is no time at all for proper pre- and post- case processing, he adds. "This also affects the children and young people. The staffing shortage affects everything; it's built up over decades."

Steve feels the union leadership has "slept through" the situation. He himself studied social work, has a

degree, "but compared to engineers and all the other degrees, I make a lot less. That doesn't make any sense. Why is it worth more to build a house or a bridge than to take care of your kids and take care of society?"

Like many others, Steve says he does not understand "why we're so tame here." At the same time, he says, there was a real strike going on in France right now.

Very many felt that under no circumstances should Verdi be allowed to make a deal for two years. One worker said: "Who knows what will happen in a year? There's a war in Ukraine, and several banks—like Credit Suisse—have already collapsed."

The warning strikes foreshadow the power workers could unleash to truly change conditions. Some 2.5 million federal and local public service workers are affected by the current pay round, which also impacts municipal contractors, non-profits, and civil servants.

But federal and municipal public sector employers will not offer an acceptable solution next week either. Especially after the sell-out at Deutsche Post, they are relying on Verdi, hoping the union will succeed—as it has every time so far—in stalling the labour dispute and pushing through a new sell-out.

To prevent this, workers must wage their struggle independently of Verdi and—as in the case of workers at Deutsche Post—set up independent action committees in the public sector as well. These committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will coordinate struggles in the public sector with those in the postal service, on the railroads and in the private sector, and network them with workers worldwide.

The wage disputes in Germany are part of a European-wide and worldwide upsurge in the class struggle. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) support the building of independent action committees and contend that the struggle for good wages and working conditions must be directly linked to the struggle against militarism and war and requires a socialist program.



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