Germany: Postal and Public Service Action Committees adopt resolution in support of the struggles in France

Our reporters
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The first joint meeting of the Postal and Public Service Action Committees in Germany took place the day after the million-strong protests in France. On May 1, President Emmanuel Macron's government responded to the millions of workers and students in the streets protesting pension cuts with police violence and mass arrests. On social media, numerous protesters posted videos of the street battles and brutal police violence.

Public sector and postal workers who gathered at the meeting discussed the significance of the French events and passed the following resolution:

> We stand in solidarity with the struggles of French workers against pension cuts and for the overthrow of the hated Macron government. We strongly condemn the brutal police action against the peaceful protests of millions.
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> The Macron government's aggressive action shows that workers are facing not just a foul reform but the government, the bourgeois state and the entire capitalist system. At stake is the fundamental question of whether the costs of the pro-war policies and the orgies of enrichment of the wealthy are to be passed on to workers.
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> Our struggles in Germany are about the same questions, and the French workers are our natural allies. We can only be successful if we fight together. Our statement of solidarity is an expression of the fact that we understand our disputes as one and the same struggle. What is needed is a comprehensive European strike against the policy of cuts and war.
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> On both sides of the Rhine, workers are confronted with a trade union bureaucracy that works closely with the government, isolating and sabotaging strikes nationally. A European movement can only be achieved against these apparatuses and requires the independent organization into rank-and-file action committees that take the strikes into their own hands and link them internationally.

The discussion at the online meeting was mainly about the question of how here in Germany the work of the action committees must be developed to get rid of the straitjacket of the Verdi union apparatus. In his introduction, Dietmar Gaisenkersting, who himself works in the public sector, emphasized that this was the crucial question. Only in this way "can we take the fight for our justified demands into our own hands."

Basically, he said, workers in Germany were "confronted with very similar issues as their colleagues in France." Verdi worked closely with the federal government and supported its pro-war policies, the costs of which were being passed on to the workers. That was why Verdi was trying by all means to push through reductions in real wages and to prevent a full strike.

All present agreed that the public sector contract must be rejected. Verdi has agreed to a 14-month wage freeze until February next year. Only in March 2024 will basic wages be increased and then only by a very small amount, i.e., around €200 plus 5.5 percent. During the discussion, several public sector workers described the consequences of this contract.

Frank, a nurse in a public hospital, said the increases were "an insult and a slap in the face for those in the low remuneration group." The extra money he would get from the wage settlement would be entirely used to pay for increased fuel costs. Since there are no public transport connections, he has to rely on his car.

Charlotte, who is also employed in health care, referred primarily to the ever worsening working conditions. "People are at their limit. The pressure is passed down. You sometimes feel guilty when you're sick because then your colleagues must fill in. Everything is very tightly staffed."

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Frank added, “It’s madness. People die every day in our care because the health system is ailing and broken.”

Ulrich Rippert, longtime leader of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, Germany), pointed out in the discussion that workers in Germany and France confronted identical problems. In France, he said, the unions were still currently calling for demonstrations because they feared they would otherwise lose control completely. “But while workers are calling for the fall of the government and a general strike, the unions are calling for negotiations and constantly assert that they are willing to work with the government,” Rippert said.

Macron could only act so aggressively and brutally, using his police, because he was in touch with the unions, who assured him they were trying everything to keep this movement under control, Rippert said.

Here, the question of action committees arises very directly. “The question of organizing independently is now the key question to be able to prepare real fighting actions.”

Felix, who is employed in social work in the public sector, then spoke. He said he had been a member of Verdi for years and opposed the proposed contract. “But I’m of the opinion that after all, you can only change and influence the union if you are part of it.” If he left now, as many were doing, “then I have no chance at all to influence anything.” It sounded great to do something “new, which is much better,” he agreed. “But how realistic is that really?” Most workers did not want to fight, he said.

Several workers responded to Felix from different angles, emphasizing that workers very much wanted to fight, but Verdi was preventing this. At Deutsche Post, Verdi members had voted 86 percent in favour of a full strike, and Verdi simply ignored that and pushed through a contract that meant cuts in real wages. Other participants thought it was completely unrealistic and illusory to think Verdi could be forced to represent the interests of the workers. “They’re on the other side.”

Gaisenkersting went on to discuss the transformation of the trade unions in recent decades, in which they had changed from being reformist organizations into the extended arms of the corporations and governments. “The greater the crisis, the more the unions tend to merge with the state.” This went so far in 1933 that as late as April 15, 1933, three and a half months after Hitler came to power, the unions called for their members to march under the swastika flag on May 1. Then, on May 2, the Nazis stormed the union halls.

Stanislaw, a nurse who grew up in the Soviet Union, recalled the role of the bureaucracy in the former USSR. The encrusted structures in the union were similar, he said. “You can’t change unions from the inside either.” Either you became part of them and “assimilate,” or you leave and build something new. He himself was a member of Verdi for 14 years before he “pulled the ripcord” and resigned.

Rippert responded, “The biggest counterargument to your assessment, Felix, is reality itself.” It was not the case, he said, as Verdi itself also claims, that only the unions were active. “Hundreds of thousands have just participated in warning strikes in the public sector, with great initiative, great enthusiasm. Now they are to be forced by a corrupt bureaucracy to accept a contract that means cuts in real wages.”

He said this was even clearer in France. Millions of workers were fighting and wanted to carry out a general strike against Macron. But the unions were putting the brakes on. “France shows what is coming here, or better: what has started here,” Rippert said. This development was taking place throughout Europe and internationally, he said. “We are in the middle of a struggle in which it is now necessary to organize independently to confront big business but also the whole state apparatus and the government.”

This, he said, was something to prepare for. The building of action committees and the independent organization of the working class were decisive for this, he said.

The contribution by the chairman of the French section of the Fourth International, the Parti de l’egalité Socialiste (PES), Alex Lantier, to the International May Day rally, was played to the meeting to underline these central statements.

Participants decided to continue the discussion and meet again on the next two Tuesdays. On May 9, it will be three days before the end of the membership ballot on the contract. On the Tuesday following, May 16, Verdi’s Federal Collective Bargaining Commission (BTK) will have made its final decision on the contract. Verdi has expressly pointed out that the BTK is not bound by the vote of the membership.

We invite all public sector workers to participate in these meetings and to contact us by Whatsapp message to the following number: +491633378340.

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