

German pseudo-left groups defend union's wage cut for public service workers

Christoph Vandreier
14 May 2023

The wage settlements struck in Germany during the past few months in the chemical and metal industries, post office and most recently in the public sector, have made abundantly clear that workers can only defend their wages if they free themselves from the straitjacket of the unions and set up independent action committees functioning as genuine organs of struggle, controlled by workers, capable of taking strikes into their own hands and breaking free from national isolation.

Germany's main unions, the IG Metall (metal workers), IG BCE (chemical industry), and Verdi (public service) are closely linked to the big corporations and the government and use all their influence to enforce the demands of the latter against workers. The unions support the government's war policy and are correspondingly imposing major wage cuts on workers who confront horrendous levels of inflation, while the wealthy continue to enrich themselves unimpeded.

Many workers are therefore rebelling against the latest deals, turning their backs on the unions and are seeking a new perspective. The independent action committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International and supported by workers all over the world are receiving a growing response. As democratically controlled organisations, they are confronting the trade union bureaucracy, uniting workers internationally and developing a serious opposition to wage cuts and official policies geared to war.

The unions are responding to this growing opposition by staging campaigns of lies to whitewash their deals, sabotage strikes and isolate worker's struggles. They are determined to prevent the development of a pan-European strike movement, directed not only against wage cuts, but against its roots in the drive to war and capitalism.

In so doing, the unions are relying on the services of a variety of pseudo-left organisations that refer to themselves as "socialist", "revolutionary" or "Marxist", but have no right to these designations. Despite occasional criticism of the leadership, these organisations are an integral part of the trade union apparatus. They do everything they can to whitewash the deals struck and tighten up the union straitjacket. More than anything else, they fear the independent movement of the working class.

This is shown particularly clearly by the rotten deal struck for the country's 2.6 million public sector workers in federal and local governments. The public service union Verdi sabotaged the workers' readiness to fight and agreed a deal which, despite record high levels of inflation, provides for a zero round in the current year and wage increases far below the inflation rate next year. Instead of a ballot on strike action, Verdi is only organising a survey of its members, which is nonbinding for the decision.

Nurses, rubbish collectors and bus drivers who worked to their limit

during the Corona crisis are reacting with indignation to these attacks. Many are leaving the union, which they see for what it is: a company police force for the government and big corporations.

This is where the pseudo-left groups spring into action. Their role is to line up behind the unions and defend them against the angry opposition of workers.

The "Socialist Alternative" (SAV), which is a faction inside the Left Party, acknowledges that the settlement in the public sector fails to even compensate for the wage losses since 2020 and, in view of anticipated inflation levels, means massive real wage losses, especially for lower-income workers. Nevertheless, it justifies the deal with the argument that other trade unions would have pushed through an even worse deal and sharper wage cuts: "It is true, however, that the real wage loss is not so drastic with this deal. The agreement is better than in the metal and chemical industries and is about equivalent to the agreement for post workers," the SAV website declares.

The Pabloite "International Socialist Organisation" also states, "Although in the public sector municipalities are constantly short of money, the possible settlement is slightly better than the contract agreed at the highly profitable Deutsche Post AG." The group even claims that the deal would "compensate for expected price increases this year and next".

For its part the Maoist Marxist-Leninist Party of Germany (MLPD) rants about "far-reaching concessions, especially for lower wage groups".

While these groups call for a "no" vote in the membership referendum on the deal, they do so solely from the standpoint of defending the union bureaucracy against workers' discontent.

The SAV even openly opposes an "enforced strike". This is no longer possible, it argues, "because the deal is presented as a fact by the media and any continuation of the struggle would be considered unrealistic for many colleagues".

Nevertheless, the SAV calls for a vote against the agreement, not in order to enforce a strike and to fight back against the wage cuts, but "in order to show the many colleagues who have recently joined and those who are not yet organised that Verdi is a vital trade union with active and thoughtful members and not a paper tiger controlled by the apparatus, which makes big demands but then fails to enforce them".

With a symbolic "no", the members of Verdi are supposed to fool their nonunionised colleagues into thinking that they have a say in the biggest real wage cut since the founding of the Federal Republic, and which is rejected by the vast majority of workers.

The "Socialist Organisation Solidarity" (SOL) of the "Committee for a Workers International" immediately blames workers themselves

for accepting the deal. Although the group calls for a “no” vote, it considers it unlikely that “after the recommendation of the BTK (Verdi Tariff Commission), the current result will be rejected by a clear majority”. Instead, SOL calls upon Verdi to function as a “militant union” until the next round of contract bargaining in a year and a half.

It is not surprising that, apart from a few empty phrases by the MLPD, none of the quoted texts mentions the broader political context of the strike. There is not a word to be found about the government’s war policy, which is being financed by the real wage cuts in the public sector; not a word about NATO’s proxy war against Russia, which is fuelling inflation; and not a word about the powerful class struggles in France and all over Europe, where workers are opposing such policies and coming into direct conflict with capitalism.

This silence is explained by the fact that the pseudo-left tendencies support these policies and want to impose them against the workers. Most of them have openly backed NATO’s proxy war against Russia. Just as the trade unions are fused with the government and state apparatus, these organisations function as an integral part of the trade union bureaucracy. The growing movement of the working class fills them with horror.

A particularly odious role is played by the “Revolutionary Internationalist Organisation” (RIO), which split from the “Workers Power Group” and today is affiliated to the Morenoist “Trotskyist Fraction, Fourth International”. Unlike the groups mentioned above, RIO does address Germany’s rearmament and refers to the international struggle of the workers. But these phrases only serve to chain the rebellious workers to the trade union bureaucracy.

“Unfortunately, there will be resignations, because fellow workers want to express their criticism,” RIO notes on its website and continues: “The disappointment that now exists among many members is understandable, but it must not lead to resigning from Verdi. By doing so, we only leave the future of the union to the leadership, which shies away from enforced strikes. On the contrary, many more colleagues must join the union in order to establish a strong base.”

One of RIO’s key demands is “NO to resignations.” To the extent that the group criticises the union leadership, it does so from the standpoint of keeping workers within the union straitjacket. Workers will leave Verdi, says RIO, “if we do not open up a fighting perspective for them WITHIN the union against the policies of the leadership”. RIO combines this claim with the fairy tale that the union leadership can be forced to fight: “If 75 percent vote against the result, the Verdi leadership will not be able to ignore it.”

In fact, the Verdi apparatus is doing just that. When postal workers voted by 86 percent against the employers’ offer and for strike action in February, Verdi ignored the vote and simply put an almost identical offer up for a new vote, i.e., it kept voting going until it liked the result.

This is not simply a result of the corruption of Verdi officials but arises from the nature of the trade unions themselves. Since their birth in the 19th century, their orientation has not been to overthrow capitalism, but rather negotiate better conditions for workers within the profit system. They were always on the right wing of the labour movement and, especially in times of crisis, moved ever closer to the capitalist state and the corporations. In Germany this reached its tragic climax in 1933 when the German trade union federation (ADGB) leadership offered their cooperation to Hitler.

The growing crisis of capitalism and the globalisation of production,

which stripped away the basis for all national reforms, completely transformed the trade unions from reformist workers’ organisations that could achieve limited improvements into apparatuses of the state and corporations, charged with carrying out the latter’s attacks on the workers. These bureaucratic monsters cannot be transformed back into workers’ organisations after 80 years of degeneration.

This is why many workers no longer regard Verdi, IG Metall or IG BCE as representatives of their interests, but rather as a form of mafia and factory police. Since reunification, the DGB unions have lost half of their members. All the talk of the pseudo-left about reforming the unions and putting pressure on the leadership is nothing but bureaucratic sleight-of-hand aimed at confusing workers and chaining them to the apparatus.

The pseudo-left groups do not formulate a programme for workers, but instead represent the bureaucracy and other sections of the upper-middle class. “The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class” writes David North in the preface to his book, *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-left*.

The more aggressive imperialism becomes and the sharper the class struggle, the more these layers move to the right and become important pillars of bourgeois rule, social cuts and war.

In contrast, the Trotskyist movement stands for the independent mobilisation of the working class against the government’s policies of war and austerity and their root cause, the capitalist system. Throughout its existence, it has fought against the social-democratic and Stalinist apparatuses and relentlessly exposed every form of accommodation to them. At the same time, it has defended the programme of international socialism against all varieties of pseudo-left ideology.

This perspective and the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party now gains decisive importance. What is necessary is not only a break with the trade unions, but the building of a European and international movement against the policy of austerity and war and for socialism. This is the only way workers can defend their rights and prevent a new catastrophe.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact