Joint meeting of the German public service and postal rank-and-file committees

# “Collective agreements serve to enforce real wage reductions”

**Our reporters**
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Last Tuesday evening, the Rank-and-File Committees (Aktionskomitees) for workers in the German Public Services and the German Post continued their joint discussion started the week before to organize opposition to wage-cutting and attacks on jobs.

The May 2 meeting was held in the context of the May Day protests in France. The rank-and-file committees passed a resolution in support of the workers in France whose struggle has found powerful resonance throughout Europe. From the Netherlands and from Norway, readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* reacted positively to the proposals to expand the work of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and transfer power from the union bureaucracies to rank-and-file workers.

This international focus was underscored in the May 9 meeting by the participation of Tony Robson from Great Britain, who gave a first-hand account of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee at Royal Mail. The meeting primarily focused on the issue of the war in Ukraine, including the Verdi union’s support for Germany’s military rearmament, enacted by the ruling coalition government, and its shipments of arms to Ukraine.

Dietmar Gaisenkersting, who reports on workers’ struggles for the *World Socialist Web Site* and works in the civil services, drew on this in his brief introductory remarks. “The developments in France occur in anticipation of the same developments in other countries, including here in Germany,” Gaisenkersting said. “We have the same problems as our colleagues in France.”

Pension spending is to be massively cut in France, while social spending is to be cut in Germany. “You have to view our wage dispute in this context,” he continued. “Huge cuts are being imposed here to finance rearmament and war.”

Gaisenkersting reported on German Finance Minister Lindner’s announcement of 20 billion euro in budget cuts. Since the ruling coalition categorically rules out tax increases, cuts are to be made in the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry for Families. The Ministry of Defense is expressly exempt from budget cuts. Gaisenkersting summarized: “The social cuts are to be used for the Bundeswehr and the war in Ukraine.” That is why it is so significant to organize independently of the union apparatus, he explained.

These unions are “part of the government,” he continued. Gaisenkersting described how the leadership of the Verdi union, other union bureaucrats, government officials and business representatives have met repeatedly over the past year to coordinate how to push through these cuts despite opposition from the working population.

Inflation compensation payments are the means and Verdi the instrument to do so, Gaisenkersting said. He also refuted Verdi’s biggest lies about the collective bargaining result. In the FAQs published on its website, Verdi always presents the result as the only possible outcome: “In 2023, it was not possible to achieve a tabulable increase,” and with regard to the contract duration, “only a compromise of 24 months was feasible.”

Gaisenkersting rejected these assertions. A different outcome would have been very possible, he said, but that is not what Verdi wanted. Therefore, the union leadership had “prevented a full strike by all means.” But a full strike was the only way workers could fight for their well justified demands.

Following the same pattern, Verdi answered questions

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on its website about the abolition of part-time work for older employees under collective bargaining agreements, the complete loss of the inflation compensation payment when sick pay is received, and only pro-rata payment in the case of part-time work.

"Collective bargaining agreements no longer serve to gradually improve incomes," Gaisenkersting concluded. "Rather, they are sweetheart contracts that include real wage cuts and suppress worker resistance."

In the discussion, Frank, who works in nursing, pointed out that in this round of collective bargaining Verdi is once again dividing the workforce by industry and region. "In nursing, out of consideration for the patients, you can't go on strike in a way that hurts the employers." In the meantime, he said, shifts are so thinned out that emergency staffing levels during a strike are sometimes higher than on "normal days." But Verdi would not call upon their colleagues who have a longer lever, such as the garbage workers. "Verdi is not serious about a struggle to enforce demands," he said.

WSWS writer Tony Robson told participants about the experience of Royal Mail workers, who recently formed a rank-and-file committee to defend their interests against the company and also against the bureaucracy of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). In the UK, too, more than 100,000 workers, or 96 percent of CWU members, had voted in favor of a strike. Just 17 CWU union bureaucrats overruled that vote and prevented a strike from happening.

"What really motivated us to take action against this, besides the reports of the mass strikes and protests in France," Robson said, "was the struggle of the Deutsche Post workers and the expressions of solidarity from the postal workers rank-and-file committees in Australia." That, he said, inspired Royal Mail workers to take that first step in building their own rank-and-file committee.

The committee members, he said, were not put off by the fact that they were only a small number in the beginning. "They were encouraged by the international solidarity." Meanwhile, their statements on the WSWS were read by tens of thousands, he added.

He also described how CWU leaders Dave Ward and Andy Furey had reached an agreement with Royal Mail in mid-April, the contents of which were hidden from members. In the meantime, the cuts and losses it contains have been made public, exceeding postal workers' worst fears.

"The 35-page document that has now been released contains an attack on workers in almost every line," Robson explained. "The inflation rate is 10 percent this year alone, but wages are only scheduled to increase by 10 percent over the next three years." In addition, winter work hours are to be increased, Sunday bonuses are to be eliminated and sick pay is to be cut.

The workers' protest forced the union to put it to a vote, he said. But the CWU had postponed the vote "until May 17 to buy more time again to wear down and demoralize the opposition."

The rank-and file committee, he said, was aware that its struggle was now gaining enormous importance. In Britain, too, the hated Tory government would not last a single day in power without the support of the unions. "That's why what we're doing is so important," Robson concluded, "because what we're doing is the basis for a real working class struggle throughout Europe, indeed throughout the world."

Robson answered a question about Brexit and its consequences for the working class in Britain. He stressed that the social strains and political attacks in the wake of Brexit can only be overcome "if we network, if we understand our struggle as a European struggle."

Ulrich Rippert, longtime leader of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, Germany), then emphasized that the most important preparation for this is "that as a rank-and-file committee we systematically develop our work." The struggle against real wage cuts and attacks on living standards is directly linked to the struggle against war, he explained.

The next meeting of the rank-and-file committees will take place on May 16 at 8:00 p.m. Until then, it is necessary to mobilize public sector workers against the collective bargaining deal agreed to by Verdi—for a "No" vote and the building of the rank-and-file committees.

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