

A balance sheet of the contract disputes in Germany's public sector, at Deutsche Post and the railways: Build independent action committees!

Joint statement by the Public Sector and Postal Action Committees
17 May 2023

On Monday, Verdi announced the results of the ballot on the April 22 contract negotiation results. According to the union, “just under 66 percent” of Verdi members in federal administrations, public authorities, municipal institutions and companies voted in favour of acceptance. The media is now presenting this as a considerable approval.

Some Verdi members who have the background figures have posted these on Facebook to show what to really make of them. Accordingly, only 27 percent of Verdi members participated in the ballot. That means that with 66 percent approval, just 17.8 percent of the membership voted in favour.

This is also telling for workers at Deutsche Post. If so few participated in the online vote, which was at least announced on its website, in flyers and via Verdi's social media, then there were certainly even fewer voting on the Deutsche Post contract.

The Public Sector Federal Collective Bargaining Commission nevertheless postponed its decision when it met on Monday. Not because it had doubts about the balloting procedure, but because the Saxony municipal employers association rejected adoption of the collective bargaining result by public transit operators in Saxony.

Verdi's refusal to organize a strike to secure its original demand for a real increase of €500, or 10.5 percent, over a 12-month period, i.e., one that is incorporated into basic wages, has emboldened the most aggressive employers' representatives to launch even harsher attacks on wages and working conditions.

The result of the negotiations, which will become the new contract with the approval of the Federal Collective Bargaining Commission, is an outright provocation. Social media comments are correspondingly angry.

Fred G. writes on Facebook, “I don't know anyone who thinks this agreement is good.” Responding to a Verdi tweet,

Markus said, “After the lousy deal in the last round of collective bargaining, now an approval of this bad deal. Slowly, the question really arises whether Verdi and dbb Beamtenbund (civil servants union) are still the right representatives for public sector workers.” His tweet received 353 likes. Below the Verdi tweet, another worker explains his resignation from the union. “That's it for me with you, Verdi—and quite independently of the member ballot. And I will also never again become a member of a trade union. You guys are out of your minds.”

The anger is justified. Faced with energy and food inflation of about 20 percent and skyrocketing rents, public sector workers—who have maintained public life under the difficult working conditions of the pandemic for the past three years—are to receive no increase at all in their basic wages until February 2024!

This largest cut in real wages in German history is supposed to be cushioned by an “inflation compensation payment” of €3,000, which will be paid out in monthly installments. But these represent compensation for the rapid price increases of recent years and are not included in basic pay rates. After this is used up, prices will continue to rise while wages remain at their low level.

Increases in basic rates will not come until March 2024, when prices will have risen further, and even then, it will be extremely low. Instead of the demanded €500, or 10.5 percent, over a 12-month term—which would already have been far too little to seriously compensate for inflation—public sector employees are now expected to settle for €200 plus 5.5 percent over a 24-month term. Calculated over 12 months, that represents only about €170 instead of €500!

If one takes the recent contract negotiations since the beginning of the year in the public sector, at Deutsche Post and the ongoing negotiations being conducted by the

railroad workers' union (EVG), which just agreed to a judicial settlement and thus also initiated a sellout, then a very clear picture emerges:

- Verdi, EVG and all the other unions regard their main task to be preventing a serious strike to push through the necessary wage increases in the face of rampant inflation, as well as improvements in working conditions. They are closely allied with the government and support the demand for reductions in real wages in order to pass the costs of restructuring the corporations, supporting the super-rich oligarchs and financing military rearmament onto working people.

- Verdi and all the other union bureaucracies are part of management and the corporate leadership. Thousands of union officials sit on company supervisory boards and work on the corporate committees as co-managers. They view all problems from the same perspective as the owners of capital and act as management consultants for the design of cuts in wages and social provisions. For this, they are paid princely sums in the form of supervisory board bonuses and receive other benefits and privileges. It is not unusual for them to take on high posts in municipal companies and receive six-figure annual salaries.

- The German unions are responding to the worldwide intensification of the class struggle by working even more closely with the government and corporations and by tightening their dictatorship in the factories. The strikes, mass demonstrations and street battles in France against the hated Macron government have deeply frightened the union bureaucracies. Their goal is to suppress the class struggle and prevent any independent movement of workers. Their pan-European and international apparatuses serve not to unite workers internationally but to divide nationally. The war in Ukraine and NATO's growing confrontation with Russia have exacerbated this policy of a "domestic truce" and the fomenting of nationalist sentiments.

- This gives rise to the urgent task of intensively publicizing and building our independent action committees.

As action committees, we have already emphasized several times that we stand for two fundamental principles: First, we fight for the consistent and full enforcement of workers' interests and demands. We are not prepared to subordinate our basic right to adequate wages and reasonable and healthy working conditions to the profit interests of the corporations and the government's pro-war policy. We are not begging for handouts; we are fighting for our rights.

The second principle is our unwavering international solidarity and cooperation. We know that in all countries, we workers face the same or similar problems, and we strive to combine our struggles. Against multinationals and governments, we must work together across Europe and

internationally.

Many fellow workers in city sanitation, social care and many other areas of the public sector, at Deutsche Post and at the national rail carrier Deutsche Bahn know very well that we all play the decisive role in maintaining society and the so-called public services. We have great fighting strength and are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus of Verdi. But this strength must be combined with a clear political perspective and independent organization.

That is why building the action committees is so important. Our contract bargaining struggles—in the public sector, at Deutsche Post and the railroads, and in many other areas—are part of a growing movement that is developing throughout Europe and around the world.

In France, millions have demonstrated against Macron's pension cuts in recent months, and although he has used dictatorial measures to impose the cuts, the resistance continues. In the UK, hundreds of thousands are striking against pay cuts and strike bans. During our last joint action committee meeting, a colleague from Sheffield reported how postal workers in the UK were confronting the same problems with their union as we are. He stressed how important international cooperation was. There were and are also widespread strikes in Spain, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The most important task now is to turn these struggles into a conscious European and international movement directed against exploitation, capitalism and war.

We must not close our eyes to the fact that no social problem can be solved without breaking the power of the corporations, banks and the whole financial oligarchy. The great fortunes of the super-rich must be expropriated and the economy made to meet social needs instead of the satisfaction of the profit claims of the rich.



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