

Collective bargaining in Germany's federal states: Establish independent rank-and-file committees against Verdi bureaucrats!

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On Thursday, more than 2,000 educators and social workers went on strike in Berlin, nurseries and advice centres remaining closed throughout the city. Employees of the Elbe ferries and job centres in Hamburg took strike action a week ago.

The strikers are taking up the fight for better wages on behalf of 2.5 million public sector employees in the federal states. Work in local transport, nurseries, schools and daycare centres, university hospitals, social welfare offices, road construction, materials yards, waste collection, forestry and many other workplaces is only being carried out under extreme stress due to inadequate pay and rampant staff shortages. More than 300,000 jobs remain unfilled in the public sector across Germany.

Meanwhile, the negotiators for the employers and unions have been meeting for their second round at the Kongresshotel Potsdam; a third round is to follow on December 7 and 8. However, absolutely no improvement in working conditions can be expected.

They are negotiating behind closed doors about how to implement the cuts in real wages provided for in the government's war budget. The routine of warning strikes and whistle-blowing protests serve only one purpose: to prevent truly effective industrial action.

It is the old ritual with practically always the same cast of characters: on the trade union side, Verdi union boss Frank Werneke is coordinating negotiations for the other trade unions—GEW (education), IG Bau (construction), GdP (police) and dbb (civil servants). Long-serving Social Democratic Party (SPD) member Werneke meets an old party colleague at the negotiating table: Dr. Andreas Dressel (SPD), finance senator (state minister) of Hamburg, who is leading

negotiations on behalf of the employers of the federal states.

Dressel, who was Hamburg's governing mayor for many years, is probably on first-name terms with Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Dressel feels very confident and provocatively made no wage offer at all in the first round.

Like the entire SPD and all the government parties at federal and state level, Verdi, the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and Frank Werneke personally support Scholz's "new era" in foreign policy towards an open war policy.

Werneke had invited Scholz and his deputy Robert Habeck (Greens) to speak at the Verdi union conference in September. The same conference passed a main resolution explicitly supporting the government's pro-war policies, approving the billions being gobbled up on armaments for the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) and calling for more arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Since then, the government has presented a breathtaking war budget for 2024, which mercilessly slashes funding for health and education in favour of armaments. A few weeks ago, the same politicians who are now sitting together in Potsdam decided to mercilessly tighten the thumbscrews on nursing staff in hospitals, nursery staff, railway workers, postal workers and many other workers.

Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, also a member of the SPD, is calling for a "change of mentality" that should permeate the whole of society and politics. A few days ago, he told ZDF television: "We have to get used to the idea again that there could be a threat of war in Europe, and that means we have to be ready for war,

we have to be able to defend ourselves and prepare the Bundeswehr and society for it.”

Resistance to such a war course is growing in the working class. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, blue- and white-collar public sector workers and many civil servants have been working to the limit. At the same time, they have to spend almost their entire pay on the immediate cost of living. Contrary to official propaganda, prices for food, energy and housing continue to rise. Just one example: In September, olive oil cost 34 percent more than a year ago, potatoes and potato products have risen in price by 22 percent in the same period and sugar by as much as 71 percent.

On the other hand, stock market profits continue to rise steadily and the enrichment of the super-wealthy, shareholders and big business bonus recipients knows no bounds. Half a million Germans have assets of US\$1 million or more, and 2,900 have assets of at least \$100 million. There is no wealth tax, and it is also not planned in Finance Minister Christian Lindner’s 2024 budget.

Measured against inflation and the stark social polarisation, Verdi’s demands are more than modest: a 10.5 percent rise for one year, a wage increase of at least €500, and €200 per month for trainees. The same demands were already advanced by Verdi in the collective bargaining for federal and municipal government workers, which Verdi shamefully sold out last April.

In those contract negotiations, Verdi had also initially demanded 10.5 percent, or at least a €500 increase with a one-year term, and what was the result? The union refused to fight for the demand with an indefinite strike and, as a result, workers will not receive any pay rise at all up to and including February 2024! The supposed “inflation compensation” of €3,000, paid in monthly instalments, will do nothing to change the fact that prices are constantly rising while wages remain at a low level.

Verdi and the other trade unions organised a similar sellout in other areas of the public sector: 86 percent of Verdi members at Deutsche Post voted in favour of strike action, but Verdi ignored this, acted as a strike-breaker and ended up pushing through huge cuts in real wages. The EVG followed the same pattern when it sold out railway workers who were prepared to strike.

The Verdi leadership is already deliberately refusing

to combine the struggle in the public sector with that of other workers: Verdi members in the retail sector are currently engaged in industrial action and have already staged several strikes at department stores such as Netto, Kaufland, Rewe and Edeka, not to mention Amazon. In other sectors, steelworkers and GDL train drivers are facing industrial action, and hundreds of thousands are ready to strike internationally, including teachers and other educators, social workers, and school staff in the United States.

There is only one way to finally enforce liveable working conditions and protect public sector workers from low pay and poverty in old age: The struggle must be organised independently of Verdi! Negotiations must be taken out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy, which stands on the other side. To this end, it is necessary to set up independent rank-and-file action committees.

Such action committees have already been set up among Ford workers, postal and railway workers. They will emerge in all areas of work, in the public and private sectors. The aim is not only to defend the living conditions of the working class, but also to stop the devastating development towards a third world war. This is only possible on the basis of an international, socialist programme that places lives before profits and unites workers of all countries and across borders.



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