Warning strikes in Germany's public services: "€500 billion for us instead of for armaments"

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The current public sector warning strikes in Germany express the great anger that is building up in all areas of public services. On Thursday and Friday last week, tens of thousands of care workers, nursery nurses, cleaners, social workers and midwives went on strike. On Monday, ground staff at 13 airports went on strike for the whole day; there were also strikes in the aviation security sector. From Hamburg and Berlin to Frankfurt, Cologne, Düsseldorf and Munich, a total of 13 airports went on strike, resulting in more than 3,000 flights being cancelled for around 400,000 passengers. Strikes at many municipal companies and in local public transport will follow on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, all these operations have been run down. Today, workers are confronted with the fact that the incoming Christian Democrat (CDU)-Social Democrat (SPD) coalition government is pumping hundreds of billions into the arms industry even before taking office, while it starves public services of much-needed funds.

The warning strikes are taking place before the third and decisive round of negotiations on the new public sector contract (TVöD), which will be held in Potsdam March 14-16. The service trade union Verdi is officially demanding 8 percent more pay, with at least €350 more for those on low wages, as well as an extra three days leave.

However, the union leadership already knows that the contract that will emerge will fall far short of meeting these demands. It will be no better than the one they just signed at Deutsche Post, which with 2.3 percent inflation this year only provides for a 2 percent increase, effectively lowering real wages. In addition, 8,000 postal jobs will be cut this year.

Nationwide, more than 2.6 million public sector employees are affected. On March 14, Verdi negotiators Frank Werneke (SPD) and Christine Behle (SPD) will meet with the representative of the municipal employers, Karin Welge (SPD), and current Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (SPD) in Potsdam. Their party, the SPD, together with the CDU/CSU, have just approved taking out war loans of several hundred billion euros. Up to €1 trillion are to be spent on preparing society for war!

In the public sector, this will inevitably lead to even sharper attacks on jobs, wages and social benefits. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Verdi to push this through. For this reason, the token "warning" strikes this week and next week have taken on a greater scale than originally planned. At the same time, Verdi is firmly sticking to its support for the government's pro-war policies and its close cooperation with the SPD.

In Berlin's Wedding district, a Verdi spokeswoman and representative of the Left Party, Stella Merendino, warmly welcomed the SPD's labour market policy spokesperson to the podium. Several speakers called for a wealth tax and inheritance tax, without mentioning a single word about the "special fund" for war that the SPD has just agreed with the CDU/CSU.

Last Thursday, staff were on strike at the Charité and Vivantes hospital in Wedding, where around 1,500 employees demonstrated for higher wages and better working conditions. Among them were employees of Charité Facility Management (CFM), which had been spun off from the parent company years ago. Since then, around 3,000 CFM employees have been earning up to €1,000 less than the TVöD contract provides for the remaining 23,000 or so Charité employees.

One CMF employee told WSWS, "It cannot be that billions are spent on the rich and on war, and we ordinary workers are supposed to get less and less."

Guido, who works as a cleaner at the hospital, reported on the poor pay he receives, well below €2,000 net a month despite shift and holiday work. What was particularly important to be addressed, he said, "are the poor working conditions: no paid breaks, every smoking break must be accounted for. We often must clean our work clothes

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ourselves.” He explained that he thought it “important if we all went on strike together and not just one day here and then another day there.”

What Guido expressed is on the minds of thousands across the country, because the warning strikes are carried out in isolation and separately from one another—precisely to “let off steam,” but not to really mobilise the fighting strength of the working class.

In Nuremberg, too, several strikers expressed the same wish. “The union should be taking a completely different approach,” a young psychiatric nurse from Middle Franconia told us. “In the social sector, the strike is made difficult for us,” he said. “We don’t want people to die because there is no one in the hospital. But it’s not our fault! We should finally go on strike together properly, that would show solidarity and make sense.” He added, “I would also take to the streets in solidarity with my colleagues at Deutsche Post.”

In Nuremberg, several thousand strikers took part in actions that paralysed the Nuremberg Clinic, other hospitals in Middle Franconia and the youth welfare offices and municipal daycare centres.

Many strikers carried self-made signs and banners with inscriptions such as “It’s not the strike that endangers patients, but the normal state of affairs.” Others read “I can’t work as badly as I’m paid.”

“500 billion for us instead of for armaments!” demanded nursing staff on a home-made poster. Others had written: “You’re quick on armaments, but you’re doing nothing for nursing.”

The psychiatric care specialist quoted earlier also told us, “What Verdi is demanding is not enough. Our wages are only slightly above the minimum wage. If we had a four-day week and better pay, staff turnover wouldn’t be so high.” That was why it was important for him to take part in the strike, he said. “A pay freeze—that’s just not on. We have a really stressful job in nursing, and we deserve more money than that.”

With a frown, the same nurse described the latest pay agreement at Deutsche Post as “a big Verdi joke, to be honest.” He said he did not understand why postal workers, like nurses and other public sector employees, were not paid as well as, for example, a skilled Mercedes worker.

Hundreds of leaflets with the statement by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) were distributed in Nuremberg in a very short time. It stated:

> These strikes must be made the starting point for the mobilisation of all workers against the incoming federal government. The parties in the Bundestag are currently preparing attacks on jobs, wages and social services that have not been seen since the end of the Second World War. The turning point in war policy is followed by a turning point in labour and social policy.

In his video appeal for independent rank-and-file action committees Max, a carer from Nuremberg, explained:

> There is supposedly “no money” for social services and education, but there are unlimited funds for tanks and weapons. ... Verdi’s contract bargaining is not separate from this development. The struggle for higher wages and better working conditions is inextricably linked with the struggle against war and armament.

He concluded with a strong appeal:

> A real struggle can only be waged if the working class organises independently of the bureaucratic apparatuses. We need independent action committees that take the struggle into their own hands. We need a socialist perspective that breaks with the entire capitalist system! No to wage cuts, social cuts and war! Invest in education, health and infrastructure instead of armaments and militarism! For a socialist society in the interests of the working class worldwide!

The WSWS *calls on all workers who want to participate in the development of an independent action committee at their company to contact us via WhatsApp at +49 163-3378 340 or register using the following form.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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