

Warning strikes for higher wages in Germany's public sector

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Public sector workers throughout Germany went on strike for higher wages January 13-14. In Berlin Mitte, about 5,000 strikers demonstrated, while at the university hospitals in Cologne, Bonn, Essen and Düsseldorf in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), nursing staff, laboratory workers and administrative employees staged a warning strike. The hospitals provided emergency service, while many surgeries and treatments were postponed. Employees of universities, colleges, state administration and the judiciary in NRW also walked out. Reporters from the WSWS distributed leaflets and interviewed strikers at University Hospital Essen.

The warning strike took place in the context of collective bargaining for the federal states (Länder), which began on December 3 in Berlin and entered its second round last Thursday in Potsdam. The last collective agreement for the Länder expired at the end of October 2025.

The service union Verdi and the Civil Service Federation (Beamtenbund) are demanding a 7 percent pay rise, with a minimum increase of €300, from the Collective Bargaining Association of German Federal States (TdL), their employer, with a contract term of 12 months. Around 925,000 employees covered by collective agreements in the federal states are affected; Hesse has left the TdL and conducts negotiations separately.

However, the TdL has rejected Verdi's demands and instead proposed a wage increase just above the expected inflation rate, with a term of 29 months. The long duration is a central point: What the state governments want above all is calm on the strike front in order to enforce the planned austerity measures. The second round of negotiations has thus failed. The third will follow on February 11-12, accompanied by new

warning strikes by the unions in the coming weeks.

"We must prepare ourselves for the fact that we will see more disputes and more industrial action on the labour market in the coming years," the economist Marcel Fratzscher of the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) warned recently on news channel MDR. He is expressing the justified fear in the business community of a storm of opposition in workplaces.

The unions stand ready to avert and suppress this storm. While IG Metall and the IG BCE mining, chemical and energy union are tasked with containing protests in industry, Verdi, together with the education union GEW and the Civil Service Federation, assumes the same task in the public sector.

"We would like an offer for once!" was the pathetic slogan of Verdi as it entered the second round of collective bargaining. The unions seek to degrade strikers to petitioners, with hardly a trace of fighting spirit. This is not surprising, because sitting at the negotiating table are not opponents, but like-minded people. On one side sit the negotiators for Verdi, Chairman Frank Werneke and his deputy Christine Behle—both long-standing members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—and on the other, the chairman of the TdL, Andreas Dressel, the SPD finance senator (state minister) of Hamburg.

Representatives of one and the same party are "negotiating" here, which currently functions in the federal government as a coalition partner of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). The SPD controls decisive ministries responsible for implementing savings in the public sector in favour of increased war spending, including the ministries of Finance (Lars Klingbeil), Labour and Social Affairs (Bärbel Bas) and Defence (Boris Pistorius).

It is a well-known spectacle in which all participants play their part. The government side openly represents the interests of the financial and corporate elites to trim the public sector even more strongly for profit. Union officials mime opposition and organise ordered warning strikes and noisy protests, staggered in time and isolated from one another, placing tight shackles on any movement from below.

For the unions, the result has already been determined behind the scenes—a collective agreement with a multi-year term and such low wage growth that real wages continue to fall. In recent years, Verdi has already enforced numerous such deals against its members.

Many employees see through this rehearsed show and participate in strike actions only because they see no other alternative to vent their anger and indignation.

But the union ritual is taking place under completely changed political conditions. The new year will be characterised by explosive class struggles and the dangerous development towards a third world war. Donald Trump's attack on Venezuela and his threats against Greenland and Iran on the one hand, and the major nurses' strike in New York on the other, are a foretaste of what lies ahead.

In Germany, hardly a day goes by without bad news about social cuts and mass layoffs. The consequences of the largest programme of militarisation since the end of the war are being felt everywhere: billions for the military budget are being paid for by cuts in the social and education sectors; conscription and war propaganda are raining down on school students, apprentices and trainees; and the country's infrastructure is being prepared for war within the framework of "Operation Plan Germany."

Verdi supports this government policy. Its leader Werneke has expressly welcomed the "Special Fund for Infrastructure," which serves to prepare transport routes, roads, bridges, hospitals and other infrastructure in the event of war.

Strikes in the public sector—whether in education, healthcare or administration—can only be successful if they are linked to a political fight against the government and its pro-war policy. This stands in contrast to the orientation of Verdi, which keeps the strikes small and fragmented.

This was also evident in the warning strikes last week. The unions organised only small demonstrations

and protests and avoided any larger mobilisation and coordination of the opposition. The actions are intended to delude employees into believing that the Verdi officials in Potsdam are negotiating in their interest.

Workers cannot defend their interests with Verdi, only against it. The next warning strikes must break through the narrow framework of union tactics and be made the starting point for a broader mobilisation against the policy of war and austerity. This requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees that withdraw the negotiating mandate from Verdi, establish contact with workers in other sectors and countries, and orient to a socialist perspective.



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