

Stop the cuts in real wages in Germany's public sector! For a nationwide strike movement against social cuts and war!

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26 January 2026

This week, nursing staff, teachers and other public sector employees have once again been called on to participate in nationwide warning strikes and protests. After the second round of contract negotiations between the service union Verdi and the Collective Bargaining Association of German Federal States (TdL) also failed, a third round of negotiations is scheduled for 11 and 12 February.

For years, public sector workers have been fighting against catastrophic conditions in university hospitals and health authorities, in schools and universities, in cultural institutions, government agencies or public road construction, amidst falling real wages and exploding workloads.

It is a daily marathon without respite: wherever one looks—whether at hospital wards or in classrooms—chronic understaffing and constant cuts in personnel and equipment are forcing more and more workers into a vicious spiral of overtime and burnout. Many feel that their job consists only of managing shortages and averting a total collapse of the public service.

A public sector strike this year for higher wages and better working conditions does not just involve the usual collective bargaining dispute. Workers face governments at federal and state levels that are implementing the largest rearmament spending programme since the Nazi era. The goal is to transform Germany into a great power again, which can fight its corner in the global predatory struggle for raw materials and spheres of influence.

The massive sums for the armed forces are to be recouped at the expense of working people, school and university students, pensioners and those in need.

The federal budget for 2026 provides for military expenditure of €108.2 billion (defence budget plus the “Bundeswehr Special Fund”). For this gigantic rearmament programme, the constitutionally mandated “debt brake” is being lifted, while it remains in place for the federal states and municipalities and important areas of the public sector such as health, education and social affairs. Thus from the outset, the red pencil will be applied in these areas to pay for the high debts being incurred for military spending.

“We can no longer afford the welfare state,” was the declaration of war by Chancellor Friedrich Merz last year. Workers across Europe and worldwide are experiencing similar attacks on their social gains, wages and jobs—especially in the US, where the

fascist Donald Trump is currently in the process of establishing a dictatorship and smashing everything to pieces in the education and health sectors.

Not a single social problem can be solved if the working class does not put a stop to the dangerous developments towards war with a comprehensive strike movement. For this, public sector employees must fight together with industrial workers, university and school students across sectoral and national borders.

This is the key question in the current public sector contract dispute.

Directly affected are 925,000 employees covered by collective agreements in the federal states (except Hesse). In addition, those being made to suffer include trainees as well as, indirectly, pension recipients and civil servants, who are legally prevented from striking but whose remuneration is adjusted to the contract covering the public service of the federal states (TV-L). Therefore, the German Civil Service Federation (dbb) speaks of about 3.5 million employees for whom the wage settlement is relevant.

Public sector workers have kept society running under the most adverse conditions since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Hospital staff risked their lives and health and have been working under constant fire for years. Over 46,000 posts in healthcare remained unfilled in 2024—more than in any other sector. At the same time, the burden on existing nursing staff is increasing, for example through higher patient numbers per nurse.

Teachers can also tell brutal tales of staff shortages, overtime and dilapidated infrastructure. By 2030, more than 110,000 teachers will be missing nationwide, the education and science union (GEW) warns. Fewer and fewer teachers shoulder more and more tasks, whereby their actual working time is deliberately not recorded so that the horrendous number of overtime hours does not come to light.

While the public sector continues to face one cut after another, and workers bear the burden of the economic crisis, they are also “thanked” with cuts in real wages. The increased prices of recent years have immediately eaten up every meagre wage rise contained in the 2019, 2021 and 2023 contracts.

Working class households are hit hardest by high inflation: a study by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) concluded in the crisis year 2022. After the start of the Ukraine

war, the proportional burden on the lowest-income households was almost five times as high as that on the highest-income ones.

If the ruling class now points to the allegedly low inflation rate of 2.2 percent in 2025 to dismiss the workers' demands for a significant wage increase as "unrealistic," then this is pure fraud.

Precisely in the areas of energy, housing, food and transport, which make up the bulk of the expenses of an average working class family, the price hikes are enormous. Rents in the metropolises climbed by a good 42 percent on average over five years, according to public broadcaster ZDF. This hits many working for the federal states, who frequently live in major cities and have to carry out a long odyssey in the hunt for affordable accommodation.

But despite this catastrophic social situation, the demands tabled by Verdi are far too low: only a 7 percent wage rise, with a €300 minimum increase, running for 12 months. Everyone knows that in the end, Verdi will nod through a deal that lies significantly below this level.

Under the leadership of Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician Andreas Dressel, the federal employers have rejected Verdi's demands but not yet presented a concrete counter-offer. In their key points for an agreement, the federal states mention an increase just above inflation, but with a contract duration of 29 months. Such a drastic cut in real wages combined with a ban on strikes for the next almost two and a half years would be an essential building block in the austerity plans of the state governments.

What the record of Verdi and Co. shows is that in all previous contracts it has agreed since 2020, the union signed up to a contract duration of 24 months or longer, instead of the demanded 12 months. They are enforcing a strike ban of over two years onto workers.

The union leaders reacted to the expected rejection by the TdL with toothless criticism and whining. Verdi boss Frank Werneke complained that the federal states had "not recognised the seriousness of the situation for many employees." The chairman of the German Civil Service Federation, Volker Geyer, lamented the lack of an offer: "That is disappointing!" Now one must "obviously increase the pressure and massively expand the strike actions," he said.

Workers must be warned: behind this rhetoric, the system of contract "bargaining" is rigged. The unions do not want to wage a real struggle because they have supported the militarisation and austerity policies of governments for years. They only pretend to represent the workers. Officials like Werneke are networked most closely with the government and big business and belong to the same governing parties.

Both sides at the negotiating table are primarily interested in agreeing on a long-term deal that provides the state governments with the necessary calm and time to push through their austerity policies, while keeping resistance in the form of wage demands and strikes in check.

After the first warning strikes, employees of the Autobahn GmbH protested at selected locations last week, while the GEW called on teachers to support warning strikes on different days and in different cities. This week, a health sector strike day was

announced for January 27-28 and a nationwide education strike day for January 29. The warning strikes at university hospitals in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) are also to be continued.

But the protest actions are deliberately kept small and separated from one another in time and place by the union leaderships. They serve to cushion and neutralise workers' concerns and anger so that the increasing radicalisation, especially of younger workers, does not break out uncontrollably.

What the unions want to prevent at all costs with this tactic of attrition and fragmented protests is the emergence of a larger strike movement that breaks out of the straitjacket of the bureaucracy and assumes a political character. But precisely that is necessary: the building of a strike movement that links the fight for wage increases with a fight against war and rearmament, a movement in which public sector workers ally themselves with industrial workers who confront a jobs massacre in the factories, with school students striking against conscription, and with their colleagues in the US and worldwide who are confronted with the same social problems as they are.

But this requires a break with the government partners in the trade unions: Verdi, GEW and dbb! The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) calls for the building of rank-and-file Action Committees that are independent of the pro-capitalist unions and parties, are democratically controlled by the workers themselves and are networked in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) with colleagues in the US, France, Italy, Turkey and worldwide.

These committees must establish demands that are oriented not to the governments' profit and austerity constraints, but to the interests and needs of the workers, including a significant wage increase, better working conditions, more personnel and above all the immediate end of the policy of rearmament and war. Not a cent for the Bundeswehr, no militarisation of the infrastructure—instead, billions for schools, hospitals, universities and social programmes!



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