

Warning strikes in retail sector in Berlin and Brandenburg

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Since May, there have been six phases of strike action in the retail sector in Berlin and neighbouring Brandenburg. At least 10 strike days were announced, with the most recent taking place on October 1 and 2. While the 220,000 employees want to fight for decent wages, the Verdi union is trying to impose real-terms pay cuts and poverty wages on them.

Collective bargaining rounds covering retail are being held, or have been held, in every state this year. At the nationwide kick-off on May 15, more than 5,000 employees struck at over 200 workplaces, including Edeka, Rewe, Kaufland, Penny, Douglas, Primark, Zara, H&M, Metro and Ikea. But instead of pooling the enormous fighting strength of the workforces and bringing the logistics chains of the retail billionaires to a complete standstill, the union apparatus has since organised just six isolated phases of strikes.

Verdi has no intention of enforcing the original demand of 7 percent more pay, with a minimum increase of €222 a month, over a 12-month contract. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the Verdi leadership signed a sell-out pilot agreement as early as August 26, 2026, and Verdi is demanding that it also be implemented in Berlin and Brandenburg.

The North Rhine-Westphalia deal means real-terms pay cuts, and for a group of workers who toil at the bottom of the pay scale at that. Over a term of 25 months, pay rises by 3 percent retroactively from August 1, 2026 and by a further 2 percent on May 1, 2027. Even the first stage falls short of September's 3.3 percent inflation rate. The only reason Verdi has not yet signed a deal in Berlin and Brandenburg is that the companies are resisting the alignment of wages in the East and West of the country—some 36 years after reunification!

In Brandenburg and the eastern districts of Berlin, people earn less and work longer hours. Simply adopting the North Rhine-Westphalia result would further

disadvantage East German workers. The alignment that Verdi has been promising for decades would once again be postponed for years.

The dispute centres on the lowest pay grades, which are at minimum wage level. And yet the employers respond with scorn. The Berlin-Brandenburg Retail Association is offering 2 percent from December 2026 and a further 1.5 percent from September 2027. The justification for this hefty real-terms pay cut is the old lie that employees have already received 14 percent more pay over the past three years, so there is no “need to catch up.”

In real terms, these nominal increases actually amount to a rise of just 2.7 percent, calculated using the official inflation rate. Prices for food, energy and rent, above all in Berlin, have risen far more sharply. Yet working-class families in the lower pay grades have to spend almost their entire income on these basic necessities. Food prices have risen by 37.2 percent in Berlin and 38.8 percent in Brandenburg over the past five years. Among the beneficiaries are the families that own the discounters Aldi and Lidl, who are hoarding billions.

Dieter Schwarz, Germany's second-richest billionaire, increased his wealth by €7.2 billion over the past year—without moving a box, operating a till or driving a lorry. His fortune grew from €46.5 billion to €53.7 billion, while the employees of his Schwarz Group—Lidl and Kaufland together operate 14,500 stores in 33 countries—are fighting over a starting wage of €14.90 an hour. That €14.90, which Verdi wants to set as the entry-level wage, amounts to a little over €1,700 net a month for a single, full-time sales assistant. This is just 30 cents more than the statutory minimum wage of €14.60 that takes effect in January 2027. Nobody can live in Berlin on that. Retail workers are not fighting for luxury—they are fighting over whether they can live on the results of their labour.

Schwarz did not get rich by saving a few cents at the

till. He got rich because he built a system that developed a work regime, based on surveillance and unpaid overtime, which turns every minute into profit. The owner's wealth is the flip side of the exploitation of the workforce.

But this does not apply only to this extreme example. Many sales assistants are even worse off than the employees of the large discounters or fashion chains that pay collectively agreed rates. In Berlin in 2024, only 39 percent of employees worked in companies covered by collective agreements; in Brandenburg the figure was 42 percent.

The claim that there is no need to catch up is just as mendacious as the claim that there is no money. The money is there. It is just flowing in the wrong direction: into tanks instead of wages, into war preparations instead of housing. While workers fight over €14.90, the federal government—with the backing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party—is pushing ahead with a rearmament programme worth hundreds of billions of euros. War and poverty wages are two sides of the same policy. The very same apparatuses that are holding back the strikes have lined up behind rearmament.

At the Karstadt/Galeria department store chain, collective agreements have long since ceased to apply. For years, Verdi and works councils imposed wage sacrifices and redundancy schemes in order to “save” the company. The stores were closed regardless, and a fourth—possibly final—insolvency has now been filed. At Rewe, employee representatives sit on the supervisory board and deliberate over “viable solutions” while the employees bear the costs.

The Verdi bureaucrats who help organise the sellouts are shielded by the Left Party. When Left Party co-chair Ines Schwerdtner appeared at the Verdi rally on October 1, it was not to offer support for an independent struggle. It was the Left Party covering for its friends in the Verdi leadership—as in the public sector, at the Charité hospital and at the Berlin public transport operator BVG.

What is needed is for workers to organise independently of Verdi, in action committees—organs of the workers themselves, from the rank-and-file, for the rank-and-file. In every store, every warehouse and every logistics centre, workers should elect their own representatives: democratically, subject to recall at any time, and bound by the instructions of the workforce rather than by company management, works council or union apparatus. The store committees can develop coordination across companies, states and national borders. In this way, the short, separate warning strikes become a joint struggle against Aldi, Lidl,

Kaufland, Edeka, Netto, Rewe, Penny, Amazon and Galeria at the same time.

And internationally. The corporations have long been organised centrally and internationally—Lidl and Kaufland in 33 countries, Rewe in over 21, Aldi in Europe, the US, Australia and China. They recognise no collective bargaining areas when it comes to securing profits. Only workers are supposed to take them on separately.

This struggle is at the same time a struggle against war. War divides the working class along national lines, while the corporations are united internationally. The employees at Aldi in Germany, at Lidl in France, at Kaufland in Poland and at Amazon in the US have the same enemy—and only together can they defeat it.

The *World Socialist Web Site* supports this effort. It reports on workers' struggles, publishes demands and statements and establishes the connection between workforces.

This is not about a handout of €14.90. It is about a uniform wage that people can live on; full working hours for all who want them; the abolition of involuntary part-time work; adequate staffing levels; an end to the evasion of collective agreements; and the right of workers to inspect the books, profits and corporate plans.

Not charity or lower regional wages. No rescuing corporations at workers' expense. No war for the profits of the arms industry. What is exploited in a centrally organised way must be defended in a centrally and internationally organised way.

Anyone who wants to set up a committee or report on conditions in their store can contact the WSWs in confidence, via the following form or by sending a message via WhatsApp to +491633378340.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact