

German building cleaners strike against wage cutting

By Ludwig Weller
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Following the expiration of the minimum wage regulation for building and office cleaners at the end of September, a number of companies are seeking to depress wages under the already low official limits of 8.15 euros per hour in west Germany and 6.58 euros per hour in the east. For years Germany's 860,000 building cleaners have been subjected to pitifully low wages and often work two or three jobs in order to survive.

Due to deep discontent amongst cleaners, the trade union IG Bau felt compelled to call a national unlimited strike on October 20. IG Bau represents about 10 percent of the building cleaning industry workforce.

IG Bau is calling for an 8.7 percent wage increase, bringing wages up to 8.39 euros per hour in the west and 6.82 euros in the east. The employers have responded with an offer of wage increases of just 3 percent in the west and 3.6 percent in the east enacted over 21 months.

On Thursday of last week, 96.7 percent of the union members voted in favor of the first national strike in the history of the industry. The response of IG Bau, however, has been to call out just 2,000 building cleaners on strike.

IG Bau is using such "pinpoint" tactics in order to let off steam and reach a rotten compromise as quickly as possible. The symbolic strike activities condoned by the union are far removed from any threatening action that could affect Germany's airports, hospitals, offices or schools.

This is despite the fact that some employers—as the IG Bau itself admits—are attempting to depress wages through selective redundancies. "We have evidence of contracts that stipulate wages of 6 euros starting from October 1," said Zeynep Bicici, trade union secretary

of the Builders' Union in Duisburg, Lower Rhine. Since similar documents have emerged from a number of different employers, the union assumes that the employers have undertaken a "concerted action."

According to estimates, around 80 percent of building cleaners are not employed with a proper full time contract and have no protection against dismissal. Many live in poverty and are only able to survive by retaining several jobs while at the same time applying for welfare payments.

The same trade union leaders, such as the IG Bau's president Klaus Wiesenhügel, who are now speaking out against wage dumping amongst building cleaners, were in fact responsible for the current state of affairs due to their support for measures carried out by the former Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition (1998-2005) government. Between 1998 and 2002 Klaus Wiesenhügel was a deputy for the SPD in the German parliament.

The measures introduced by his party at this time were unprecedented in Europe and established an extensive low wage sector within the space of a few years. Not only did the trade unions accept the SPD's Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV policies, they also agreed to wage contracts that saw a regular annual decrease in take home wages.

As a result, the wage contracts struck by IG Bau with building cleaning employers are amongst the lowest in Germany. Wiesenhügel was also responsible for regularly enforcing wage cuts in the building industry. During the wage negotiations in 2002 Wiesenhügel went one step further and even surprised the employers' association: "We are not demanding anything but rather giving the employers the possibility of striking a deal which enables them to recoup the agreed wage increase. In response jobs in the industry

are to be stabilized.”

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