

# Warning strikes in German public sector: Growing anger over low wages and insecure working conditions

By Gregor Link  
28 September 2020

At the end of last week, the Verdi trade union suppressed the strike of 22,000 German postal workers. Now, 2.3 million public sector workers face a similar sellout, including educators, local government workers, nurses and daycare workers, who are at the forefront of the pandemic but face wage cuts and poor working conditions.

Verdi's wage demands include an increase of just 4.8 percent over at least one year—barely enough to compensate for inflation and rising rents. Also, they are calling for a one-off coronavirus bonus of €300, equivalent to a daily “tip” of just under €1.70 in relation to the pandemic that has been going on for seven months.

It is already clear that even this small increase will not be implemented. In the last negotiations, which Verdi had begun with much higher demands, the result was a reduction in real wages for a large part of the public sector.

This time, there could even be a nominal wage cut. The employers' side is demanding at least a wage freeze. “Actually, there should be cuts,” the chief negotiator for the municipal employers, Ulrich Mädge (Social Democratic Party, SPD), had declared in August.

A warning strike called by Verdi last week made clear that the trade union will not act against these threats, but on the contrary, would try to push through wage cuts against the workers. Verdi did not even call out one in a thousand of the workers on strike and so ensured that the few stoppages that did take place had no effect at all. The union also refuses to take up the many demands of workers for better protection against infection at the workplace.

In this way, employers and trade unions make it clear that the garbage workers, educators, nurses and daycare workers who risk their lives and health every day in the pandemic are of no value to them. After hundreds of billions have been thrown at the banks and corporations in recent months, those who bear the brunt of the pandemic and have to work under the most adverse conditions now have to pay for this.

While Verdi is doing everything it can to demoralise workers with its pseudo-strikes, the anger among workers in all sectors is growing enormously. Especially among educators and daycare workers, who face a particularly high risk of infection due to the lack of protective measures and have had to work under increasingly adverse conditions for years, the opposition is strong.

“Children and the educators who work with them do not seem to have a very high status in society,” writes Alexandra Paul, an educator from Lower Saxony, in a letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Due to the general lack of personnel, desire and reality are sometimes far apart. With 25 children in a group plus two educators—how can there be time for the individual child?”

The coronavirus pandemic will make this devastating situation even more visible, Alexandra says. “Our real purpose for the economy and also for a section of parents will become more and more obvious—we are merely a place where they can unload their children.” On the public sector contract talks, she writes that it is not only a question of money but also of insufficient protection against infection. That is why she joined the union in the first place at the beginning of the year, but in the meantime, she is disappointed because the union

is doing nothing to defend them. “No demands, no proposals for sound plans, no answers to our questions”, said the educator.

“There was no clapping or anything else for educators,” says Paula, a teacher from Stuttgart, who asked us to change her name. When the pandemic spread rapidly in Germany in March and April, she and her colleagues had “provided emergency care for the children of retail workers, nurses and so on, under constantly changing conditions, and without protection!”

Another educator took this up on Facebook, complaining that many did not even receive protective equipment. “In many institutions, staff are even forbidden from wearing a mask, for educational reasons! We are supposed to simply pretend that coronavirus does not exist within the day-care centre walls.”

Similar reports of a daily overload and lack of protection against coronavirus come from nurses.

“We care staff were often compared to heroes during the pandemic,” writes Nina Böhmer, the well-known author and nurse from Berlin, in a viral Instagram post. “In reality, we are simply human beings. We are people who selflessly care for others, even though the work itself is often inhumane because conditions are not what they should be. Although the job often demands everything from us, we always turn up for the next shift. Sometimes, everything blows up in our faces and we still keep calm. It feels as if we suddenly have six arms and do everything at once.”

The ruthlessness with which the government is treating public service workers is bound up with the dangerous reopening of the economy. For companies to make profits again, workers are supposed to go back to work under completely unsafe conditions and send their children to schools and day-care centres where dangerous in-person teaching is in operation.

A second wave of the pandemic is already developing in neighbouring countries such as France, the Czech Republic, Austria and Belgium, and is inevitable in Germany as well. Germany is “no better armed than other countries,” Charité Hospital virologist Christian Drosten recently warned. Hospitals will be overloaded, nurses, educators and other public employees will fall ill in high numbers and thousands will die.

Only a broad offensive by the working class can stop

such a development. Public sector employees must therefore place the demand for safe working conditions just as much at the centre of their concerns as a substantial wage increase. No educator, nurse or refuse worker must go back to work unless basic measures are taken to protect them from infection!

To be able to wage such a struggle, they can have no confidence in the unions’ ability to conduct collective bargaining in their interests and must organise themselves independently in rank-and-file action committees. They must take up contact with workers in other sectors, network internationally and prepare a general strike.

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