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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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## Thousands of postal workers in Germany strike again for 15 percent pay rise

On Monday, around 8,000 Deutsche Post employees went on strike again across Germany. Major strike rallies were held in 10 cities, including Berlin, Munich and Rostock. On Tuesday, thousands again stopped work and protested, including in Hamburg, Dortmund, Saarbrücken, Nuremberg, Frankfurt/Main and Stuttgart.



Postal workers rally in Berlin on 6 February [Photo: WSWS]

The strikes at letter and parcel centres and in delivery services come ahead of the third round of contract bargaining between Deutsche Post and the United Services Union (Verdi), which will take place in Düsseldorf on Wednesday and Thursday.

A vote of Verdi members forced the union to raise its originally proposed demand for a 10 percent wage increase for a total of 160,000 postal workers to 15 percent. Trainees and students on work placements are to get €200 more per month.

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After Deutsche Post failed to table an offer in the second round of negotiations in January, tens of thousands took part in three days of warning strikes.

Monday's rally in Berlin demonstrated that workers are not prepared to accept low wages and want to be compensated for the increased prices for energy, fuel, food and rents. More than 1,000 workers at Deutsche Post and its subsidiaries, including DHL, took part. They came by bus and train from Berlin, Brandenburg, Thuringia, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt to the rally in front of the Verdi federal administration building.

As well as local Verdi representatives, the union's former federal chairman Frank Bsirske, the current head of Verdi, Frank Werneke, as well as his deputy on the federal executive board, chief negotiator Andrea Kocsis, all spoke.

A Deutsche Post spokesperson described the warning strikes as excessive because the company had already announced an offer tabled for Tuesday and Wednesday's negotiations. In the same breath, he reiterated that wage increases of 15 percent were "not justifiable."

A young postal worker from Berlin expressed the sentiment of many of his colleagues: "Verdi's demand of 15 percent is not enough at all. We need at least 25 percent to make ends meet. But we probably won't even be able to get 8 percent."

Postal workers, most of whom are low-income earners, are justifiably outraged by the arrogant attitude of the company board under CEO Frank Appel.

Christian, a DHL parcel delivery worker since 2010, lives with his family in Berlin. "Without my wife's salary, we couldn't manage. Our big boss, Dr. Appel, earns a cool €10 million a year," he said angrily. "And that's not just him, there are a whole lot of other managers sitting up there," he added. Asked about the war in Ukraine and its consequences, Christian said, "I am not in favour of this war. We live here, we are not being threatened. What are these arms deliveries for? The money would be better put into day-care centres and schools."

Ali and Hassan, both DHL parcel drivers, report that the work is getting harder: "There are more and more parcels every year." In view of this grind and because of inflation, they, like most of those we spoke to, think that the 15 percent demanded is actually too little. Hassan must pay €900 a month in rent, "That doesn't leave much left at the end of the month. And with the rising prices for everything else, you can't even get by on your wages."

In response to the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) election appeal "Vote against war! Vote SGP," which SGP supporters distributed at the rally,

Hassan and Ali expressed their disgust at the war in Ukraine: “Why are so many weapons being supplied there?” And they know who must pay: “It’s from our tax money. But there’s supposed to be nothing for us.”

Karsten works for Deutsche Post in Rüdersdorf near Berlin. He, too, thinks we are “on the completely wrong track” on the issue of the war in Ukraine. “You would have to negotiate with Russia to end the war.” He also agrees that the price increases are because of the war. He hopes that a real wage increase will come out of this round of contract bargaining, but is sceptical about Verdi. He and his colleagues would not accept a low deal: “If the Post doesn’t come up with anything reasonable, then we’ll just have to go on strike for real, even for weeks.”

Marion works in Deutsche Post’s Magdeburg branch and is also prepared to fight for the wage demand. The fact that the Post claimed that the €8.4 billion in profits were made in other areas and not in the letter and parcel services was a pretext, in her opinion. Firstly, the company did make profits in these areas, just not as high.

Moreover, “That also has to do with the pricing policy. And the federal government is also involved in this.” She hopes that after the third round of negotiations “there will be a double-digit result—for 12 months.” Because last time, “the agreement, with its long duration, was a sham.”

At that time, in September 2020, Verdi had agreed to gradual wage increases of 3 and 2 percent for a duration of 28 months! “I don’t think they will dare to do it again now,” Marion said, confident of victory.



A postal worker from Berlin with 20 years’ service (left) and SGP election candidate Endrik Bastian [Photo: WSWS]

A postal worker from Berlin who has been working at Deutsche Post for 20 years explained that he was there mainly out of solidarity with the 90 percent of his colleagues

who only receive the minimum wage. “They have families to feed, children, and so on. How are they supposed to manage to support their families on this wage?” You can’t work at the Post and then take on some second job to cover the cost of living, he said. “The workload has increased enormously in the 20 years I’ve been there. Colleagues get less money and have more work to do at the same time.”

In the face of this situation—low wages falling in real terms, increasing workloads, the enrichment of the Deutsche Post board and shareholders, billions spent on war and rearmament—postal workers are showing a willingness to fight.

The Verdi officials know this. At the rally in Berlin, Verdi leader Frank Werneke calculated that inflation of almost 8 percent last year and 6 to 7 percent this year meant big real wage losses. “We want to secure real wages,” he said. Verdi negotiator Andrea Kocsis said the 15 percent demand for a 12-month term “is necessary, fair and it is feasible.”

That is simply a lie. Neither Werneke nor Kocsis have the slightest intention of fighting for the demand. As far as they are concerned, the warning strikes on the eve of the bargaining round serve to blow off steam before they agree to a sell-out, and Verdi has decades of experience with this.

The union is a member of Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s “Concerted Action”—a corporatist alliance of government, employers’ associations and trade unions directed against workers. For four decades, Werneke has been a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the party that implemented the “Hartz IV” welfare and labour “reforms” bringing in benefit cuts and opening up a low-wage economy, and which launched the special fund of €100 billion for the Bundeswehr (armed forces). These billions are now being recouped by cuts in wages and social spending.

Frank Bsirske sits in the Bundestag (federal parliament) for the Greens, who are screaming loudest for more weapons to be sent to Ukraine and for an escalation of the war. Verdi also supports arms deliveries to Ukraine and NATO’s proxy war against Russia.

It is quite possible that Verdi and Deutsche Post have already agreed to a deal behind the scenes. Next Monday, the Verdi bargaining commission will meet to discuss the outcome of the third bargaining round, after which the union may well attempt to cut short the postal workers’ fight.

Postal workers in Germany can only fight for higher wages and reasonable working conditions if they take the negotiating mandate away from the Verdi bureaucrats and massively expand the strikes. This requires building rank-and-file action committees that are independent of Verdi and the other unions.

They are not alone in this. In Britain, postal workers, public sector workers, National Health Service workers, teachers and transport and rail workers are fighting to defend their right to strike, for higher wages and decent jobs. On February 1 alone, half a million took part in strikes and demonstrations.

In France, millions are protesting against the plans of President Macron's government to raise the retirement age by two years, which amounts to a massive reduction in retirement benefits.

Verdi official Kocsis mentioned the strikes in England at the Berlin rally and expressed her approval. The assembled strikers were asked to raise their fists in the air as a sign of solidarity, which they did enthusiastically. But in reality, Verdi's support is for the trade union bureaucracy there—Kocsis specifically named the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which works closely with the UK government, just as its counterpart in Germany does, to rein in and sell out strikes.

The strikes by postal and public service workers in Germany are part of an international working class offensive that must be developed into the basis for the struggle against wage cuts and sackings, against war and its cause, the capitalist profit economy. This requires the building of independent action committees and their unification in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, which is standing for election in the Berlin House of Representatives (state legislature) on Sunday, is advocating.

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