

Germany's kindergarten teachers strike [DE]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thousands of German toddlers are being turned away from nursery school today as their teachers hold a national strike over working conditions. With coloring books uncolored and ABCs unlearned, the country that invented the word kindergarten (literally "children's garden") suddenly finds its preschool education system under scrutiny.

More than 20,000 teachers and day-care workers put down their crayons across Germany on Tuesday, including the states of North Rhine Westphalia and Bavaria, and eastern states such as Saxony and Thuringia. The teachers are demanding less stressful working conditions in the country's state-run kindergartens (which cater to children from the age of 2 or, in some states, age 1) and are calling for a new "health-protection contract." The industrial action is being organized by public-sector union Verdi and the GEW education union, which says that teachers are overburdened with red tape and suffer from health problems caused by their jobs. "Teachers have to cope with large groups of children — in some cases there are two teachers in charge of 25 children," says Martina Soennichsen, a spokeswoman for Verdi.

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The unions have a long list of demands, ranging from regular free health checkups for kindergarten workers and better sound insulation in classrooms to ergonomic chairs and counseling.

But unofficially, this is also a dispute over pay. According to union estimates, a full-time teacher earns about \$3,350 a month, while part-time teachers, who make up the majority of Germany's kindergarten staff, earn \$2,100 a month. "We don't earn enough money and our working conditions have gotten worse," Elke Rumps, a kindergarten teacher in Cologne tells TIME. "We take kids from 10 months old, [we look after] large groups, and parents expect so much from us. We have to integrate kids from families with social problems, carry out our normal teaching duties and also have to fill out countless forms — it's very emotional and stressful work."

Local councils, which are responsible for paying teachers, say their budgets are desperately overstretched and the unions' demands are unrealistic. Meanwhile, the association of German cities and councils has slammed the unions' muscle-flexing, saying the strike "would only harm parents and children." But most parents seem to back the strike action, even as they struggle to juggle work and child care. In Berlin's leafy Kollwitz Square, home to a small but crowded playground, many parents say they support the teachers' goals and are unfazed by the disruption. "The nursery teachers work long hours and they're often too tired and stressed to look after the kids properly," says Xenea, mother of 3-year-old Anna, who is darting around and playing in the sand. "At my daughter's kindergarten, there's one teacher to 10 kids. And when one teacher falls sick or can't make it, parents have to jump in," she says.

That sympathy is even more surprising when you consider how hard it is to get a child into kindergarten in Germany. There are 50,000 kindergartens in the country, 17,000 of which are run by local councils. (The rest are run by churches and parents' groups or are privately owned). Spaces are limited, and there are no guarantees: finding a spot for your child in a state-run nursery school is like playing the lottery, with where you live being the determining factor. At one state-run kindergarten in Cologne, teachers say 65 parents have joined the waiting list for two free spots opening up this summer.

When it comes to available and affordable day care, Germany lags far behind its European neighbors: only about 18% of German children under age 3 attend state-run nursery schools, compared with a European average of 35%. To try to catch up, the German government has pledged to triple the number of day-care spaces to 750,000 by 2013, and Family Minister Ursula von der Leyen, herself a mother of seven, wants to give one in three children under the age of 3 the chance to attend nursery school.

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- reprinted from TIME

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/09/05/germany%E2%80%99s-kindergarten-teachers-strike-de> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff>