

## Extraordinary bargaining in the German cleaning sector – “We don’t sweat for minimum wage”

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In 2022, 700,000 workers in Germany's industrial cleaning sector received pay rises of between 12.5% and 16.4%, negotiated by IG BAU outside the normal bargaining rounds at a time when inflation soared, staff shortages were rife and the German government just significantly increased the minimum wage.

UNI Europa spoke to Zeynep Bicici, IG BAU head of department and president of UNI Europa Property Services, about her organising work in the commercial cleaning sector and the 2022 campaign.

### Increasing of the legal minimum wage

Before inflation skyrocketed, IG Bau and the employers' association BIV (*Bundesinnungsverband des Gebäudereiniger-Handwerks*) agreed a sectoral minimum wage of 12€ in the 2020 bargaining round. A few months later, however, the government decided to raise the statutory minimum wage to 12€ as well. So for the cleaning workers, there was no difference between a sectoral agreement and the legal minimum wage, which frustrated both the workers and the union. For Zeynep Bicici, it was clear that the union had to react: *“When the legal minimum wage was raised to 12€, we called on the employers to negotiate again, because colleagues need to be fairly rewarded for their hard work”*.

### “We don’t sweat for minimum wage”.

Discussion followed at the IG Bau sector conference in the spring of 2022. It was clear that the new legal minimum wage had changed the context, as around 500,000 of the sector's 700,000 workers, most of them women, receive the sectoral minimum wage. The union therefore agreed to call for early negotiations.

### Participatory demand-making process

As a first step they launched an online quick poll on workers' demand for a minimum wage increase, with an open invitation to get involved in IG Bau. Zeynep Bicici points out the importance of starting with a participatory process to *“see how we can involve people and see together what demands we should make and what everyone is willing to do to achieve them”*.

Many workers responded within weeks. The demands were clear: higher wages for all. More than 80% said they would even change jobs if they were paid only the legal minimum wage.

IG Bau used this argument to put pressure on the employers. *"We have a shortage of skilled workers everywhere at the moment, they can't get people, so they have to change the conditions accordingly, so that people don't move to other sectors"* says Zeynep Bicici.

## Visible actions to back up the bargaining committee

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The second step involved the workers in visible actions to support the negotiations, because *"collective bargaining doesn't just take place at a negotiating table"*.

Before the two bargaining rounds in May and June, IG Bau members showed their support with photo petitions and actions outside their workplaces, holding signs with slogans such as *'We're worth more than the minimum', 'We don't sweat for minimum wage' and 'Respect for cleaners'*. In Leipzig, industrial cleaners even hung a banner on the central building of the cleaning company *Gegenbauer Service GmbH*.

On 2 July, after 10 hours of negotiations, IG Bau and the employers agreed on a wage increase of 1.50€ for everyone over the course of two years time.

In short, IG BAU managed to open extraordinary negotiations, mobilise its workforce and reach a satisfactory compromise within a few months. A pay rise of up to 16.4% in one of the lowest paid sectors in Germany is a major success for strengthening sectoral bargaining and decent working conditions. And the workers will not stop there: *"Our main goal is to get out of the low-wage sector - 13.50 euros is still not enough, we will keep going!"*

## The background: year long investments in organizing

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To understand this trade union achievement, it is necessary to take a step back in history, because the 2022 agreement is also the result of years of organising in the commercial cleaning sector.

Commercial cleaning is a low-paid sector and much of the work is 'invisible' because it takes place after office hours, at night or in the early hours of the morning. That's why IG BAU decided to step up organising in 2008, *"to build a sustainable membership base in companies through empowerment and self-organisation of workers"*. According to Zeynep Bicici, the first strikes in 2009 were the starting point of the *"uprising of the invisible, since then they are here and they are unstoppable"*.

With a clear strategy and focus, the union's organisational strength has gradually grown. To this end, IG BAU has organised several training sessions for members, works councils and secretaries on organising methods such as 1-to-1 talks and finding organic leaders. IG BAU is supported by UNI Europa's European Power and Organising Centre (EPOC) (read more about EPOC's work [here](#)). In recent years, these efforts have paid off with successful mobilisations and bargaining rounds, such as in 2019, when employers walked out of negotiations and IG BAU redoubled its efforts to build organisational power (read more [here](#)). The case of IG BAU shows how long-term investment in organising and mobilising workers pays off, not only in regular bargaining rounds, but also in the unforeseen circumstances of inflation and policy changes.