

PDS, unions impose wage cut on Berlin transit workers

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The recent alliance of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the Election Alternative (WASG) likes to present itself as a new “left party,” and its programme talks a lot about workers’ rights. However, in those regions where the PDS has a controlling hand in political events, it tramples on the interests of the working class. A good example of this is what happened in the state-run Berlin Transit Corporation (Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe—BVG).

In mid-June, the Berlin Senate (state legislature), which consists of a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the PDS, implemented a massive programme of cuts at the BVG with the support of the public service workers’ trade union Verdi. The 13,000 employees at BVG, Germany’s largest public transit operation, who have already faced substantial attacks on their working conditions under the SPD-PDS, now confront a massive cut in wages.

In January of this year, Verdi signed up to a wage agreement containing an 8 percent reduction in salaries. At the time, the media stressed that working time had also been cut from 38.5 to 36 hours a week. But this was cover-up of the real situation. In reality, the slashing of break time, holidays and other time-off meant a considerable increase in workloads. From the outset, the Senate’s general agreement to forgo compulsory redundancies over the next 10 years, brought in with the agreement of the union, has proved worthless.

It only took six months before the Berlin Senate announced that the savings package previously agreed no longer went far enough. Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) now demanded a 12 percent wage reduction, combined with longer work times (an increase from 38.5 to 42 hours a week) and the cutting of holiday bonuses. At the same time, Sarrazin also

declared that compulsory redundancies could no longer be excluded.

To put the workforce under pressure, the SPD and PDS threatened that, without further cutbacks, the continued existence of large sections of the BVG were in danger. Sarrazin pointed out that from 2008, the European Union was demanding more competition in public transit, and stressed that the BVG would only be able to continue if it operated “like an economically well-run enterprise.” According to one official, without concessions the bus division would be in acute danger from 2007.

However, the proposals to make further cuts encountered widespread resistance in the workforce. Initially, Verdi signalled its opposition to such far-reaching cuts and organised a seven-hour warning strike. Since this appeared to have little effect on the Senate, the union felt compelled to threaten an indefinite strike, and began to organise a strike ballot.

In the meantime, the Berlin economics senator Harald Wolf (PDS) had secretly begun to intervene to prevent a strike. He invited Verdi’s national chairman Frank Bsirske to a “personal meeting.” They both agreed that a strike in the capital at the beginning of the vacation period would immediately make headlines, and should be prevented under all circumstances. This was followed by two further meetings behind closed doors, before Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD) finally brought negotiations to a “successful conclusion”—just before the strike ballot at BVG was due to be held.

The strike ballot was swiftly abandoned, and instead of counting the votes, the ballot boxes were sealed and taken away. Union negotiators unanimously accepted the deal, which Verdi functionaries then tried to justify to the workforce.

On average, the new contract agreed on by the union

implemented a wage cut of 10 percent, and those workers not covered by the new contract faced a cut of 12 percent. The different work times in east and west Berlin were lowered to a uniform 36.5 hours a week, without any compensation in wages. Holiday pay was abolished completely, and the Christmas bonus limited to a maximum of €1,000.

The Senate celebrated the wage cuts as a success and announced that Berlin would “save 38.5 million euros in staff costs” as a result. Wowereit thanked Verdi for its “important contribution to the reorganisation of the budget.”

The union retrospectively justified signing the contract by pointing to the agreement on special protection against dismissal, valid until the year 2020. The fact that such a formal concession offers the workforce little or no security was soon revealed at BVG.

Previous concessions packages at BVG had also been justified by Verdi with reference to supposed protection against dismissal. This was more like a form of blackmail—either cuts are accepted or jobs will go. But each time, the cuts that had been justified using this argument were followed by further, even worse cuts, pushed through with the same argumentation.

The new provision for special protection against dismissal explicitly applies only to trade union members, which is a novelty. In the past, collective wage agreements had always been declared to be “generally binding,” which meant they were valid for all employees. Verdi obviously hopes such measures might now help it stem the loss of members. “It should once again be worth being a trade union member,” is how a Verdi spokesman summed up this agreement, stressing that in future bonus programmes should only benefit union members.

But Verdi’s “bonus programme,” comprising cuts in wages and benefits, provoked indignation among workers who had been ready to launch an industrial struggle. The union’s capitulation will inevitably lead to an increase in union members submitting their resignations.

At the same time, the pressure exerted by PDS Senator Harald Wolf to push through the wage cuts confirms the key role of the PDS in disciplining the working class in those regions where it holds power. While the SPD-PDS Senate in Berlin has been avidly

implementing drastic cuts to the city’s social fabric in order to repay banks and investors hit by the city’s recent finance scandal, it has had no compunction about undermining the wages and conditions of public sector workers. This is the real face and practice of the PDS, which it will continue in its new guise as the “left party.”



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