

Germany: Verdi prepares sell-out of Telekom workers strike

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For the last two weeks German public sector union Verdi has been striving to maintain its control over Telekom workers and keep their strike low key. Despite management delivering an ultimatum on its plans to transfer 50,000 employees into an in-house company where they will earn up to 40 percent less while working longer hours, Verdi is refusing to expand the strike and organise a serious struggle.

Instead, Germany's largest public sector union with nearly 2.5 million members has mobilised just a few thousand Telekom workers to undertake limited and localised action. The restricted nature of the industrial action only serves to wear down the militancy of the strikers and blunt their efforts to repulse the management offensive. The initial militancy of the workforce was clearly expressed in the 96.5 percent vote in favour of strike action.

Three days after the start of the Telekom strike 20,000 post office workers from across Germany—all members of Verdi—demonstrated in Berlin against the forthcoming privatisation of the post office. Instead of organising a common struggle of the post and Telekom workers—who a few years ago were part of the same state-run enterprise—Verdi has sought to keep the two sections of workers strictly separate.

The reason for this is simple. Verdi is not opposed to privatisation of the post office, although it will mean the loss of up to 32,000 jobs. It is merely demanding a privatisation based on “expertise”.

The Verdi demonstration in Berlin was held under the motto “Against liberalisation without expertise”. This ominously resembles the activities of union officials 12 years ago who smoothed the way for the privatisation of Telekom and have since supported all further management restructuring initiatives as long as they have a “social component”.

During the second week of the Telekom strike, pharmaceutical workers in Berlin began a limited strike. Following a workshop meeting, the entire early shift of pharmaceutical workers began protest action over contract bargaining talks in Berlin. Once again all the strikers were

Verdi members, but the union is doing everything in its power to keep the disputes separate and to isolate the strikers.

Above all, Verdi is determined to prevent the Telekom strike developing into a broad political mobilisation against the German grand coalition government (Christian Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, Christian Social Union) even though all important decisions relating to Telekom have been made by the government—in particular through the close consultation of the finance ministry headed by Peer Steinbrück (SPD) and the labour ministry of Franz Müntefering (SPD).

While Verdi functionaries at strike meetings vent their wrath against the “antisocial and completely unacceptable” actions of the Telekom executive committee, the head of Verdi Frank Bsirske recently met with the Telekom boss René Obermann, finance minister Steinbrück and SPD parliamentary fraction leader Peter Struck for a secret “crisis summit” to negotiate an end to the strike. A similar meeting occurred one week before, but a vow of silence was taken on the content of the discussions and plans for further meetings.

Verdi's double-cross was also evident at a meeting of Telekom strikers held outside Berlin city hall last Wednesday. The number of participants was deliberately kept low in order to avoid other public service employees participating to make their own protest against the anti-social policies of the Berlin Senate—a coalition for the last six years between the SPD and the Left Party/PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism).

One of the first speakers at the rally to declare his “solidarity and support” for strikers, was none other than the Berlin economics minister Harald Wolf (Left Party/PDS), who has played a key role in the past few years slashing 15,000 public service jobs in the German capital.

During his period as minister, 3,000 public transport jobs have been axed with wage cuts of 10 percent for the remaining employees. At the same time, the Berlin Senate has implemented a long list of social attacks including: huge job and wage cuts in Berlin hospitals; the creation of 34,000

one-euro-jobs to replace regular job contracts; a drastic increase of fees and reduction of personnel and teaching staff in nurseries and schools; and cuts of around 75 million euro in subsidies to Berlin's three universities—corresponding to 10,000 fewer students and over 200 fewer contracts for professors.

Although this catalogue of cuts by the SPD-Left Party Senate is well known, the strike committee still called upon the assembled Telekom workers to applaud Wolf's speech.

Wolf was followed by Bodo Ramelow, deputy leader of the Left Party's parliamentary group, who reiterated a string of lame clichés over solidarity and compliments to the strikers: “You have shown that you are not ready to accept Obermann's attacks ...”

Ramelow then announced that the Left Party would apply for an emergency one-hour debate in the Bundestag over Telekom and would remind the government of its responsibility as principal shareholder, as if it were more sympathetic to the workers than the Telekom executive. In reality it is the government that is leading the attacks on Telekom workers and discussing its tactics directly with Obermann in the Treasury.

No mention was made of the fact that, along with six trade unionists and works council members, two leading members of the SPD (Ingrid Matthäus Maier, former deputy chair of the SPD Bundestag faction, and Thomas Mirow, undersecretary of state in the Finance Department) sit on the Telekom executive and have an effective majority.

Instead Ramelow ranted against “turbo-capitalism” and demanded that “locusts such as Blackstone” must be restrained. “When competition gets out of control, then competition must be regulated,” he demanded. He made no mention of the fact that his own party is quite prepared to work with hedge funds such as Blackstone in those regions where it shares power. This is the case in Berlin where the Senate has sold state-owned housing and handed over partial control of its water supply to hedge funds.

A speaker from Verdi, Susanne Stumpenhusen, complained from the platform that right-wing politicians had conducted a spiteful campaign against the Telekom strikers and the union's demand for a legal minimum wage. She specifically referred to Roland Koch (CDU), leader of the Hessian state government. Koch had declared his opposition to a minimum wage and that his state authority had quit the local wage contract agreement in order to be able to better negotiate wage cuts. This was dishonest and unacceptable, Stumpenhusen complained, but neglected to mention that the Berlin Senate, given pride of place on the Verdi podium, had done exactly the same. It was, in fact, the first state authority in Germany to duck out of local contract agreements.

One of the final speakers was Lucy Redler from the

Election Alternative, Labour and Social Justice group (WASG). Redler also evaded the main issues raised by the strike and sought to present Verdi in the best light.

The strike had “put considerable pressure” on Obermann and the Telekom executive, Redler declared. World leaders, she continued demagogically, were fearful of the protests, which would accompany the forthcoming summit of G8 leaders. Calling for more pressure to be put on the government, she pondered, “I ask myself, why the DGB [German Federation of Trade Unions] does not organise a country-wide solidarity demonstration for the Telekom strikers.”

Redler declined to answer her own question but the reasons are obvious. The DGB and its member trade unions support the grand coalition. They have supported all of the attacks on workers' social gains by both the current coalition and its predecessor, and regard their main role as maintaining control over an increasingly disgruntled membership while preventing any unified struggle against the government.

It is impossible to lead any serious struggle to defend social and political rights without opposing this reactionary policy of the trade unions.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed an editorial board statement that placed this issue at the centre. It declared:

“Only a few days into the strike, already it can be clearly stated: If this strike remains under the control of the Verdi functionaries, it is doomed to failure.

“Support for the strike therefore must be bound up with a struggle against the opportunist policy of the trade union. This offensive by the company executive—backed by the government—demands an entirely new political strategy. Production must be taken out of the hands of the financial elite and placed at the service of society as a whole.

“The strike must be made the starting point of a fight to break with the old nationally oriented organisations—the trade unions and the SPD—and to unite workers in all industries throughout Europe and worldwide in the struggle for a socialist reorganisation of the society.”



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