

Berlin transport workers strike

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7 February 2008

Public transport in the German capital came to a standstill from midnight on Friday, February 1, to 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, February 2. Transport workers responsible for Berlin's subways, buses and trams took concerted action in a 39-hour strike. The strike was directed against the contract policy of the Berlin city administration (Senate), which consists of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—also known as the Left Party).

The workers are demanding a 12 percent wage increase, or at least €250 extra (gross) per month. The only services to run in Berlin were the suburban railway system (S-Bahn), which is affiliated to Deutsche Bahn (German Railways), and one private bus company.

Originally, the workers trade union, Verdi, had announced a token strike on Saturday, which would have left commercial and business travellers and students unaffected. But transport workers reacted angrily to an offer made Thursday by the local employers' association, KAV, which called for a wage freeze for its almost 10,000 employees with just a 6 percent increase for new starters. At the same time, management indicated that transport workers in Berlin were already paid too much.

On the same evening, Verdi called for a strike on Friday night in order not to lose control of its members.

Since the conclusion of the last contract two years ago transport workers have undergone a considerable worsening of working conditions. Workers employed after 2005 receive a basic wage of just €1,650 (gross)—the same amount paid to drivers working for the Berlin Transport Co.

The contract of 2005 had been agreed by Verdi with the SPD/PDS Berlin administration and led to unparalleled attacks on working and contract conditions. Workers were required to sacrifice up to 12 percent of their salaries. At the same time, Christmas benefits and holiday pay were cut. Working conditions worsened considerably following the axing of bus lines and the introduction of new regulations regarding breaks and turnaround times. There has also been a marked increase in accidents and physical attacks on bus drivers.

The 2005 contract had not been struck in the course of regular contract bargaining, but was rather negotiated directly between the head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, and the economics minister for the Berlin Senate, Harald Wolf (Left Party), during an "intimate walk in the forest." The deal was then sealed by the leader of the Senate and city mayor, Klaus Wowereit (SPD).

Verdi sought to directly implement the required cuts in personnel expenditure at the expense of its own membership. Just last November the Senate made a further round of cuts to the public transport budget amounting to a sum of several tens of millions of euros.

In January this year the Senate proudly announced that Berlin had notched up a budget surplus of €80 million,— i.e., a sum comparable to the cuts made in the transport budget in the course of the past few years. Even so, according to the city's finance senator and chairman of the transport (BVG) supervisory board, Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), the cuts do not go far enough. He has drawn up plans for fresh cuts and declared: "At €165 million, approximately a third of expenditure (of a total of €530 million) is spent on personnel—which is too expensive and who are too many."

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the Verdi bureaucrat in charge of negotiations, Frank Bäsler, announced that the union leadership had "big problems keeping our colleagues calm."

Erdogan Kaya, a 41-year-old bus driver, summed up the anger of his co-workers. Saying that he does not understand the actions of the Senate, he commented, "We have always paid our taxes and fulfilled our duties. Then the politicians create havoc and ruin the city's budget and we have to pay the price. This is what we did in 2005. Now it is time, however, to win back some of the money we sacrificed then."

The workload had increased enormously, Kaya added. "The worker-kilometre ratio has doubled for all workers in recent years. The incidence of cardiac arrests is increasing and many complain about psychological stress."

Another bus driver, Claus Peter Geiler, 55, stressed that increasing numbers of personnel have been rendered incapable of driving. "Formerly workers suffered from physical ailments. Now, however, the psychological burden is increasing, which makes colleagues unable to continue working as drivers."

One hundred twenty-five transport workers were subject to physical violence in 2006 and 2007. "The reduced turnaround times mean that one cannot make up for any delays involving the inevitable transit delays," Geiler said. "The new rules for breaks make it impossible to exchange information and remain in contact with co-workers about delays and other problems."

With union members still angry over the deal worked out by their union with the Senate in 2005, Verdi is already preparing

a new sell-out of the strike. Verdi negotiator Franc Bäsler has already declared that the 12 percent wage demand was not written in stone. “We are interested in arriving at an acceptable solution at the negotiating table,” he said.

A ballot for all-out strike action has not been prepared and on Saturday Bäsler told a Berlin local newspaper, “We will analyse the situation and wait for the time being. There is a meeting of the Senate taking place and we are hoping for discussion.”

For its part, the Senate has issued only negative reactions. Sarrazin called the strike disproportionate and declared: “It will not be possible to extort the BVG or the state.” The chairman of the board of BVG, Andreas Sturmowski, even questioned the legality of the strike and told the *Berliner Zeitung*: “Our customers had no chance to prepare for the strike. That is completely unacceptable and has nothing to do with a regular warning strike.”

This reaction is all the more remarkable when one bears in mind the pettiness of the demands raised by Verdi. If one takes into account the cuts in Christmas and holiday pay, then the 12 percent demand by Verdi does not even compensate for the cuts in wages following 2005. With inflation levels on the increase at present in Germany, the “maximum increase” called for by Verdi in fact represents a huge drop in real pay compared to 2003. Between 2003 and 2005 there was no increase in pay for transport workers.

Verdi has made expressly clear that—despite a surplus budget—the union was not calling for the reversal of cuts made in 2005. According to Axel Schroeder, personnel council head for Berlin South, “We do not want to reverse the cuts ... we stand by the contracts, which were signed in 2005.”

The trade union has not the slightest intention of taking up a struggle against the SPD/Left Party Senate, although the administration is responsible for unparalleled levels of social decline in Berlin during recent years. And Verdi was not only responsible for organising attacks on BVG workers. With the help of the trade union, the Berlin Senate was also able to impose a 12 percent wage cut on all public employees.

The union does not see itself as a force for organising resistance to these policies, but rather seeks to push ahead with their implementation at the expense of its own members. The Verdi bureaucracy in Berlin has especially close links with the SPD, and especially with the Left Party. At least three members of the Left Party also sit on the Verdi executive committee. One Verdi executive committee member, Gerd Boddin, occupies a leading position inside the Left Party.

At the same time, the union has cultivated close ties to the employers. In 2007, the 18-member supervisory board of the BVG (which includes nine workers’ delegates belonging to Verdi) unanimously appointed Lothar Zweiniger as the new head of personnel. Zweiniger was previously the deputy regional chairman of Verdi in the state of Lower Saxony and later served as personnel chief for the transport services of the

city of Bremen (BSAG). In the latter capacity, he was instrumental in making the BASG “fit” for the global market. He has the same plans in store for the BVG.

The refusal of the union to take up any serious struggle against the Senate is particularly clear from its divisive tactics. It is not only transport workers who are currently in dispute with the Berlin Senate. A total of 60,000 workers employed in public authority offices, children’s nurseries and schools, as well as police and fire-brigade workers, have also lodged wage demands. Verdi is the main union covering all of these professions, but has nevertheless refrained from conducting any joint campaign in their defence.

Berlin public workers still recall the role played by Verdi in the recent past and there is widespread discontent among the rank and file. Since its formation in 2001, Verdi has lost a fifth of its membership. In addition, the recent strike by German train drivers has shown that it is possible to challenge the authority of the major trade unions organised in the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB).

Since the start of the train drivers’ strike there has been a growth in the number of workers throughout Germany who have switched to the train drivers union—the GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer). According to GDL Berlin regional head Hans Joachim Kernchen, “People have simply had enough of the wheeling and dealing between Verdi and the BVG and are now giving voice to their dissatisfaction over substantial losses of income.”

Under these conditions, the latest warning strike last weekend can only be seen as a means organised by the union to allow members to let off steam. Behind the scenes the Verdi functionaries are furiously working to negotiate a rotten compromise with their friends in the Senate. Transport workers in Berlin must organize their dispute independently of the trade union bureaucracy and join with other sections of workers to build a broad movement to oppose the SPD-Left Party Senate and its policies of social cuts.



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