

Berlin transit workers go on strike

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6 March 2008

Transit workers employed by the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) and its subsidiary, Berlin Transport (BT), launched an all-out strike Wednesday morning.

Technical workers employed by the two companies had already begun strike action Tuesday evening. The strike effectively brings to a standstill the metro, street car and bus system in Berlin. Only the suburban metro line (part of German Rail) is functioning, while attempts are being made by the city to set up alternative bus lines.

In a strike ballot last week, members of the public service union Verdi voted by 96.9 percent for strike action. BVG employees had largely paralysed transport in the German capital at the beginning of February with a 39-hour strike.

Verdi has been negotiating since the beginning of January for a 12 percent wage increase—at least 250 euro per month—for all 11,500 BVG employees. In response, the local employers' association (KAV) offered a graduated salary increase amounting to six percent by 2010. This increase, however, would apply only to BVG workers employed since 2005 and the 900 employees of Berlin Transport.

The Berlin transit strike is part of a growing public service strike movement that is developing across the country. On Tuesday, tens of thousands took part in warning strikes in a total of eleven German states.

Verdi also carried out strike action at several airports on Wednesday. Lufthansa was immediately forced to cancel 147 flights.

The train drivers union GDL has announced that beginning next Monday it will launch an unlimited strike covering all forms of rail traffic—long distance and local passenger service as well as freight transport. Train drivers have been in dispute with German Rail (DB) management for nearly a year and were recently confronted with a package from DB which laid down harsh and provocative conditions for a settlement.

The Berlin transit strike is directed against the Berlin Senate, which is controlled by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party. In power for the past seven years, the “Red-Red” coalition in Berlin has pushed through drastic wage cuts and job cuts in the public services. Economics Senator Harald Wolf (Left Party) and Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) work hand in hand to slash wages and attack workers' living standards.

As a result, the mood amongst BVG workers has reached the boiling point. Since the conclusion of the collective agreement agreed by Verdi two years ago, their working conditions have worsened drastically. Employees lost up to twelve percent of their wages and Christmas bonuses and holiday pay were cut.

Verdi also agreed to a plan which divided staff according to length of service. All BVG workers employed since 2005 received just 1,650 euro per month (gross)—the pay level of drivers for Berlin Transport. Employees with more service received a safeguard that resulted in a slightly less onerous loss of income. At the same time, work schedules were intensified, bus lines were cut and new regulations were introduced regarding breaks and turn-around times.

Now the Senate and the BVG executive are trying to depress the wages of veteran workers to the low level of low seniority employees. SPD Finance Senator and BVG supervisory board boss Sarrazin has spoken out against the “high wages” of workers with longer service.

Demagogically employing the argument of “solidarity,” Sarrazin even opposed the BVG chief executive, Andreas Sturmowski, when he proposed a wage deal that would have included compensation for inflation. In an effort to incite popular anger against BVG employees, Sarrazin declared that any wage increase for veteran workers would have to be offset by increased ticket prices. Sarrazin thus employed the

same tactic used by the head of German Rail, Hartmut Mehdorn, against the train drivers.

Functionaries of the Left Party have also publicly opposed the strike. In the *Berliner Zeitung*, the speaker on transport affairs for the Left Party, Jutta Matuschek, attacked both Verdi and the GDL. “Verdi obviously wants to outdo the GDL,” Matuschek said. “We can not accept that.”

The deputy leader of the Left Party Senate fraction, Stefan Liebich, pleaded in a press statement that Verdi end the strike as soon as possible. The slogan must be “negotiate instead of escalate,” he said, and added that the interests of both sides had to be considered. In order to maintain the BVG as a public enterprise, he continued, the reorganisation process had to be continued, even if it caused “hardships.” According to its budget for 2008/2009 and its financial plan through 2010, the Senate wants to cut a further 10,000 public service jobs.

Verdi is playing an utterly cynical role in this conflict and seeking to restrain the militancy of its members. A closer look at the role of the union reveals a dense network of corporatist relations between Verdi, the SPD, the Left Party and the local employers’ association. One finds members of the same union or party on both sides of the negotiating table.

Several union leaders sit on the six-person executive of the local employers’ association. Norbert Schmidt, head of personnel for the Berlin Water Company, was formerly a director of the ÖTV public service union, which later merged with Verdi. Manfred Rompf, head of personnel for Vivantes, was formerly a chairman of the regional committee of Verdi in the state of Hesse. Lothar Zweiniger, the head of personnel for BVG, was formerly deputy head of Verdi in the state of Lower Saxony.

There are also close links between the Left Party and Verdi in Berlin. A total of seventy Verdi functionaries took part in the founding conference of the Left Party last summer, and the union has representation at the highest levels inside the party. In the committees responsible for contract bargaining it is quite common for members of the Left Party to be seated on both sides of the table. In addition, BVG personnel chief Zweiniger is a close friend of the head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske who, like Zweiniger, also comes from Lower Saxony.

Following the third round of talks with the local employers’ association (KAV), Verdi Regional Chair Susanne Stumpfenhusen complained before television cameras that “nobody from the KAV was prepared to carry out serious negotiations with us.” She suggested that BVG supervisory head and Finance Senator Sarrazin had “put handcuffs on his representative.” To which the KAV replied: “The employers’ side regrets that the union does not give due consideration to the limited scope of action available to the BVG and BT.”

Verdi negotiator Franc Bläser threatened a tough and drawn-out labour dispute. But all of these exchanges in front of the media are just for show.

Verdi was forced into the present strike by mass resignations from its organisation. Since the merger of all public service unions to form Verdi in 2001, the union has lost a fifth of its membership.

The loss of membership accelerated in the course of the train drivers’ strike, which the Verdi leadership publicly opposed. Since then, Verdi has struck a more “radical” stance. Nevertheless, over a hundred Verdi members at the BVG and BT have switched to the GDL.



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