

Striking Berlin transit workers speak out

Our reporting team
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Early Wednesday morning, 12,000 rail, streetcar and bus workers in Berlin began an unlimited strike bringing the largest transit system in the country to a halt.

Despite a sudden cooling in the weather, bringing snow and fierce winds, several dozen striking transport workers manned a picket of a Berlin Transport Enterprise (BVG) depot in the northern part of the German capital city, where they spoke with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

One of the workers described the mood amongst the strikers as “carefully optimistic.” In the past, agreements had been made that resulted in the undermining of wages and working conditions. “This time we don’t want to let that happen,” he said.

Another added: “At least this time we are not alone.” On the same morning, nearly all of the country’s airports were hit by strike action. Germany’s biggest carrier, Lufthansa, was forced to cancel a total of 300 flights. Many other areas of public service were also hit by strike action, and train drivers who have been in dispute with British Rail management for nearly a year have announced an unlimited rail strike beginning Monday.

The strikers expressed a markedly critical attitude towards their trade union—the public service union Verdi. All BVG employees are aware that the TV-N (contract agreement for suburban transport) was negotiated and signed by Verdi two years ago. The contract resulted in wage cuts of up to 12 percent and cuts to Christmas bonuses and holiday pay. Verdi had sought to place this deal in the best light, arguing it was the only guarantee against more redundancies.

“There can be absolutely no talk of concessions to stop redundancies,” one striker told the WSW. “Working conditions have worsened, and the drive for increased productivity is such that one has the impression that they want to drive us out of our jobs.”

Strikers were particularly angered by the splitting of the workforce along the lines of service years agreed by Verdi and local employers’ association (KAV) in the deal struck two years ago. All BVG workers employed after 2005 receive a basic wage of just 1,650 euros, while workers with longer service receive a small additional amount to slightly reduce their income loss.

“Just think of it. We work here side by side, do exactly the same work, bear the same responsibility and get completely different wages. That creates a lot of bad blood,” said one worker who has driven buses for the BVG for the past 28 years but did not want to give his name.

While strikers were prepared to talk, many preferred to remain unidentified. “I have a family,” said one and made clear that strikers who could be identified speaking to the press could “very quickly have problems” with management.

Many strikers were already aware of the close links between leaders of their trade union and the Left Party, which not only co-governs in the Berlin senate in a coalition with the Social Democratic Party but also sits on both sides of the table when it came to contract negotiations. Less well known, however, was the fact that the head of personnel for the BVG, Lothar Zweiniger, and other members of the KAV employers’ association, which has been sharply criticised by the strike committee leadership because of their unyielding attitude, are also Verdi members.

After a long discussion, an older bus driver who had worked for the BVG for more than 30 years said, “There is a lot of discussion among the strikers over Verdi and also a great deal of criticism by colleagues. Many had not thought that such a deal as was struck two years ago would be possible. The present strike is Verdi’s last chance. If it ends in a lousy deal, then the union can reckon with resignations en masse.”

Although the entire subway system in the capital is at

a standstill, affecting millions of citizens, the strike has the broad support of Berliners. An opinion poll published by the *Berliner Zeitung* revealed that 72 percent of the population supports the labour dispute and regards the demand for higher wages for transport workers and public service workers as a whole as entirely justified.

Even the conservative Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* published the views of four citizens who travel regularly on the metro. All of them supported the strikers. A shop owner expressed her anger at having to close her shop in the city centre because of the strike, but stressed, “I do not blame the workers who have gone on strike, however. They must improve their incomes because everything has become so expensive.”

Henry Lau, 58, has been a BVG bus driver since 1973 and has three children. He told the WWS, “The cuts during the past few years meant that my wife has been forced to go working again because we want to maintain our living standards. I cannot do that on my own any longer. For example, two years ago we were pressured into working 38.5 hours instead of 36.5 hours per week. That involves a significant loss of income. A number of bonuses were cut at the same time.

“Now we have so called ‘springer weeks’—days when I have no definite work plan. It means that I am informed at very short notice when and where I should work the next day. Formerly, we were compensated for such forms of work. Now that has all been done away with. The average monthly wage has decreased by about 300 euros in the few years.

“It is very disappointing that such income losses have been implemented by a Left Party-SPD senate. In particular the SPD, which was once a workers’ party, is now stabbing us in the back. Although I must say, I do not know nowadays whom I should vote for. Formerly, it was easier: one voted for the lesser evil. Nowadays, one can cast one’s vote for any party, but nothing gets better.

“The manager salaries have shot up. It is incredible that they can still avoid paying taxes. A part of these billions must be returned and be invested, for example, in the pension schemes. These have been plundered for decades. Why does the money always have to be spent on armaments and war? They should see to it that whatever government is in power, money stays in the pockets of ordinary citizens and is made available for

the whole population.

“But nobody takes up these issues. During the past years, Germany has become a completely employer-friendly country. Employers are supplied workers free of charge from the labour exchanges. They can fill their pockets till they are bursting—all at the expense of the workingman. Many workers can no longer pay the rent and are barely able to survive—that is indicative of the decline of a major industrial nation.

“In my opinion, it was high time for this strike. Many colleagues think the same. I hope the population as a whole shows some understanding. In the past few years, we were forced to accept a pay cut of 12 percent. This is quite unacceptable for a normal household. We have kept quiet for much too long. We should have done something much earlier, but everyone naturally fears for their job. Hardly anybody dares to take a stand nowadays because he does not know if his job will be waiting for him tomorrow.

“I can remember the huge strikes that took place in 1974. I had just begun working here with the BVG. It was like a breath of fresh air, and we were able to enforce an 11 or even 12 percent wage increase. We were also involved in the strike here, and I took part for half a year. That was a big help to us at the time. From then onwards, my wife could remain at home. Then our children came. I have three children. We are lucky that the children have now left home. It is sad to say, but today we could not afford three children. We just could not provide for them.”



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