

Left Party attacks striking transport workers in Berlin

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As the walkout by transport workers in Berlin entered its second week, leading members of the Left Party have viciously attacked the BVG (Berlin Transport Company) strikers. The Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel* reported that the Left Party leadership is more hostile toward the transport strike than the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—“at least with regard to workers with more seniority in the BVG.”

The newspaper does not name names, but announces that the following point of view prevails “in the leadership of the Left Party fraction”: the strikers “are still conducting their labour dispute with the West Berlin mentality that they will be handed everything on a plate and have obviously not understood how privileged they are. The management also shares responsibility for this. They have done nothing to reduce privileges.”

The Left fraction is also apparently of the opinion that, “if necessary, room for negotiation exists only for those hired since 2005 and who were not rewarded with the old BVG privileges.” The fraction also understands, “from an economic point of view,” the stance taken by Berlin Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) who has refused to make any concession to the strikers. “After all, the BVG has debts amounting to approximately €850 million—and there is virtually no room for an increase in wages,” writes the *Tagesspiegel* of the attitude of the Left Party.

The leader of the Left Party parliamentary fraction, Uwe Döring, used the newspaper *Junge Welt* to try to minimise the attack made by his party on the strikers. He did not want to refer to “privileges” with respect to workers with more seniority, he said. In fact, however, the enmity expressed by the Left Party towards the BVG strike comes as no surprise. It plays a key role as coalition partner of the SPD in the Berlin Senate and like the latter sides completely with the employers in this dispute. Two years ago the Left Party was crucial in implementing large-scale cuts in public service—including the BVG.

At that time it supported the agreement, which was signed by the transport workers union (Verdi), the so-called contract for suburban transport (TV-N). The consequences

for BVG employees were devastating and involved considerable wage cuts and a worsening of working conditions. BVG workers lost up to 12 percent of their salaries and Christmas and holiday bonuses were also cut.

At the same time, the agreement involved a division of the workforce into new starters (i.e., all those hired since 2005), who received just €1,650 per month (gross), and older employees with more service. The pay scale for new starters represents a 30 percent loss of wages compared to older workers doing the same job.

Now the SPD and Left Party are intent on depressing the wages of more senior workers to the level of the new starters. The offer so far made by the Senate includes a 6 percent graduated wage increase for new starters, while long-term employees—i.e., most of the 10,000-strong BVG workforce—will get nothing.

To this end the Left Party demands more “solidarity” on the part of more senior workers. In a statement, Left Party fraction deputy leader Stefan Liebich wrote that it was important “on the one hand, to ensure the approximation of the incomes of new starters and established employees, while ensuring a socially fair rate structure for passengers.”

Liebich’s demand for a “socially fair rate structure for passengers” places him firmly behind Finance Senator Sarrazin, who has declared that any higher wages for employees would “necessarily” involved increased prices for public transportation.

Both the SPD and Left Party are trying to incite the population against the strike using fears of higher fares, agitation against the alleged “privileges” of long-term employees and references to a supposed “West Berlin everything-on-a-plate mentality.”

The Verdi union, whose functionaries are closely connected to the Left Party and the Senate, has no intention of opposing such a campaign. In reality they are all participants of a bureaucratic stitch-up. They negotiated and signed the TV-N contract two years ago and still continue to defend the agreement despite the devastating consequences for Verdi members. In view of the increasing militancy of

their own membership and the threat of mass resignations from the union, the bureaucrats felt compelled to draw up new demands and organize a strike. But the demands made are extremely moderate and even if fully implemented would fail to recoup past losses.

Now Verdi is intent in organising the strike in a such a way that it runs out of steam and increasingly encourages a public backlash against the strikers. Losses for the BVG have been minimal under conditions where most commuters already have seasonal or annual travel passes.

In the course of the eight days of the strike, the union has failed to organise a single large demonstration to mobilize popular support. When striking workers organised a spontaneous protest march from one bus depot to another, they were ferociously turned on by Verdi functionaries. Any future spontaneous actions outside of the control of Verdi have been strictly forbidden.

In the past few months over 30,000 signatures have been collected in Berlin to oppose the planned privatisation of water services. But although the Senate has rejected the petition, Verdi has done nothing to link up the present strike with the protests against privatisation by water board employees (also organised in Verdi) and other local authority workers facing attacks.

Privatisation plans have also been drawn up for the BVG. Contrary to the Left Party's claims, the setting up of a transport subsidiary (Berlin Transport—BT) and the systematic driving down of wages are not aimed at fending off privatisation, but are rather direct preparation for such a measure. Verdi is quite well aware of such plans, but is doing all it can to prevent the BVG wage strike linking up with the fight against privatisation.

At the same time, protests by teachers and nursery personnel against cuts in the education budget and unreasonable conditions at schools, together with protests against the closure of a number of libraries and social facilities, reflect the extent of public discontent with the anti-social policies of the SPD-Left Party Senate. But Verdi is intent on preventing the BVG strike from turning into a broad political mobilization against the Senate.

Instead it has directed verbal attacks against the local employers' association (KAV), whose offer is "completely unreasonable" and "a provocation." The designations are correct, but what the Verdi functionaries fail to mention is that the KAV has the full backing of the Senate consisting of the SPD and Left Party—two parties that include large numbers of Verdi officials in their ranks.

In addition, three of the KAV's six-member executive—including its chairman—are Verdi members. They began trade union careers many years ago and obtained leading positions on employers' organisations based on their

union connections.

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 70 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.

If the leadership of the strike remains in the hands of the Verdi bureaucracy, it will inevitably end with a rotten compromise involving cuts in real wages when inflation is taken into account.

It is critical for workers to break from the control of the Verdi leadership and build an independent strike committee. In addition, strike and action committees must be established in all depots to supervise the negotiations and establish cooperation with employees from other sectors of public service and private industry, as well as students and other layers of the population.

This is the only way to ensure that the strike becomes the starting point for a broad and successful political mobilization against the SPD and Left Party Senate.



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