

# Verdi trade union prepares sell-out of Berlin transport strike

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After only 12 days the public service trade union Verdi has wound down the strike by transport workers employed by the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) even though the local employers' association (KAV) had refused to make any sort of concession.

Verdi called upon all BVG driving personnel to go back to work while several thousand workers in related transport shops, technology and administration are to continue strike action.

The negotiator for the trade union in Berlin, Frank Bäsler, sought to present this gradual resumption of work as an example of "flexible strike tactics." According to Bäsler, the BVG must now pay drivers, but due to the lack of maintenance and repair, buses and trains would fall out of service while clerical work would also suffer.

But rather than intensifying the dispute, the so-called "selective strike tactic" is merely the preparation for a sell-out. Verdi has split the strike front and also conceded a number of its main demands. So far Verdi had described its demand with the "formula": "12-250-12", i.e., a 12 percent increase for all BVG personnel, or at least an increase of €250 per month (gross) for all. At the same time the trade union had insisted on a "negotiable offer" as a condition for suspending the strikes.

Local Verdi official Susanne Stumpenhusen explained last weekend that Verdi is merely requesting from the employers' association a so-called "obligatory negotiations corridor," i.e., an increase of from 3 to 9 percent for between 12 and 30 months. The real content of this "corridor" was revealed by Berlin strike leader Bäsler, who explained that the union would be prepared to accept an employers' offer of just 3 percent more in pay for a maximum period of 30 months.

Bäsler's comments confirm that Verdi is signalling

its readiness to negotiate an offer that is lower than the inflation rate and therefore would mean a further decline in real wages. The union has simply abandoned the previous demand for a minimum rise of at least €250 per month.

Verdi has thereby stabbed strikers in the back. A deal along the lines being proposed by Verdi would mean that the BVG workers would end up actually losing money when one takes into account the loss of earnings incurred during the days of strike action.

This capitulation by Verdi also confirms that the trade union has no least intention of challenging the Berlin Senate, which consists of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party—two parties in which the majority of Verdi functionaries are members.

Over two years ago, Verdi cooperated with the Berlin Senate to impose a contract for suburban transport personnel in the face of opposition from its own members. The contract involved wage cuts of up to 12 percent and drastic attacks on working conditions and bonuses, including Christmas and holiday pay.

The contract also split employees into two groups—those with more seniority who received slightly higher wages and new starters who receive up to 30 percent less. The Berlin Senate is now intent on depressing the wages of workers with more seniority to the level of new starters.

Verdi undertook the most recent cynical manoeuvre in the face of growing resistance from BVG personnel and the threat of spontaneous strike action and mass resignations from the union. After nearly 96 percent of its members voted for a strike, Verdi functionaries began making militant speeches and organised strike action. At the same it ensured that such action was restricted to BVG workers. Verdi was intent from the start on systematically isolating the strikers.

There is widespread opposition within all sections of public service in Berlin to the anti-social policies of the city's Senate. However, Verdi refused to link transport workers with other layers such as workers protesting the privatisation of the city's water supplies, teachers opposed to cuts in the education budget and nursery and library employees who also confront cuts and closures.

When union members called for increased pressure to be exerted on the Senate, Verdi recently organized a tiny demonstration, involving about 500 of the total of 12,000 strikers. Even then Verdi ensured that the protest did not take place in front of the city council offices. Instead it was held at a remote location in the east of the city.

At the rally the chairman of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, grumbled about the stance taken by the employers' association, which had refused to enter into any serious discussions or negotiations. What he neglected to mention is that half of the executive of the employers' association—including the chairman of the KAV board—are Verdi members. They all have a long career in the trade unions behind them and have used their connections to climb to the highest management posts.

The stubborn and arrogant stand adopted by the KAV is inextricably bound up with its close relations with Verdi. It is confident that the union has absolutely no intention of pursuing the demands made by its members.

The aim of the strike has not been to put pressure on the employers' association and the Senate, but rather to break the resistance of militant public service workers with two weeks of fruitless strike action involving large losses of pay and frustration for BVG employees. Verdi's message is: See—even with strike action one cannot get anywhere! This message is also intended as a warning to other sections of public service workers.

Verdi is in fact acting as a direct aid of the SPD and Left Party in the Senate. Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) was able to depart for his Easter holiday a week ago with the breezy comment: "No concessions!"

Important lessons must be drawn from Verdi's strategy. The struggle against the Senate cannot be led by a trade union that has close links to the ruling parties and shares their political point of view. Defeat is inevitable if the leadership of the strike remains in the hands of the Verdi bureaucracy.

It is therefore necessary to break Verdi's control and develop an independent strike committee. In addition, strike and action committees must be set up in all depots to supervise negotiations and establish forms of cooperation with workers from other sections of public service and private industry as well as students and other layers of the population.

This requires not only an organizational break with Verdi, but also a wide-ranging discussion on the necessity for a new perspective based on a socialist transformation of society. It is necessary to oppose the corporatist collaboration between management and the unions embodied in the German system of "social partnership."

This is the only way to prevent the planned sell-out and make the current strike the starting point for a broad political mobilization against the SPD and Left Party Senate.



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