

Verdi union sabotages Berlin transport workers' strike

Chronology of a sellout

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The delaying tactics used by the public service trade union Verdi to prevent Berlin transport workers from taking full strike action are assuming an increasingly grotesque form.

Eight weeks ago, 97 percent of the employees of the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) voted to go on strike. Since then, the leadership of Verdi has done everything in its power to prevent any serious and consequent industrial dispute from taking place and undermine the militancy of its members.

The initial strike was broken off in the middle of March after 12 days—just at the point when it was beginning to bite. At the same time, Verdi junked its original demand for a wage increase without any sort of concession being made on by the employer's side—i.e., the Berlin Senate, which consists of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party. When Verdi members reacted angrily to the concession made by its leadership, the union bureaucrats responded by calling bus repair depots out on strike while allowing all other BVG staff, including drivers of buses, trams and subway trains, to go back to work. The result was to split the workforce. Bus drivers were unable to work according to schedule and bus depot repair personnel could not effectively strike.

The systematic throttling of the strike by Verdi has encouraged the local employers' association (KAV) and Berlin Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD) to respond with a series of provocations against the BVG workers. Last week, the BVG executive committee reacted to the limited strike by bus workshops with a "cold lockout." This means that bus, tram and subway drivers who are unable to start work because their vehicles are in need of repair will not be paid.

The *Berliner Zeitung* (April 14) described the strike tactics of Verdi as a "strategy of de-escalation," with the union leadership "evidently keen to de-escalate" the wage dispute and do everything to ensure that the dispute did not get out of hand. The newspaper then referred to the close links between the trade union leadership and the Senate.

At the same time, the contents of a letter by the local Verdi representative Susanne Stumpenhuisen to the leaders of the parliamentary fraction of the SPD and Left Party were revealed. Stumpenhuisen states the position of Verdi once again and

pleads with the Senate for talks. The letter was aimed in particular at the media and the general public.

The claim often made by Verdi that the Senate is not ready to negotiate is nonsense. In reality, the trade union is in daily contact with the Senate, and both sides are cooperating closely to break the resistance and militancy of the BVG employees. The majority of the Verdi bureaucrats are members of either the SPD or Left Party. They are not only intimately linked to the parties in the Senate, but also agree with the basic Senate policy. This is why Verdi has refused in recent weeks to organise any sort of effective action.

A sober analysis of the course of the dispute makes clear that the justified demands of the BVG workforce can only be implemented when strikers break Verdi's grip over the dispute and commence a political struggle against the SPD-Left Party coalition in the Senate.

On December 13 of last year, under pressure from its members, Verdi raised the demand for a wage increase of 12 percent, or a minimum of 250 per month.

On January 22, Verdi announced token strikes and a ballot on strike action after the BVG and Finance Senator Sarrazin refused to make any offer. When the local employers' association then made a pathetic offer, amounting to a provocation, Verdi felt forced on February 1 to organise a 39-hour strike in order to maintain its grip on the workforce. Despite the loss of earnings entailed for those striking, participation in the strike was sufficient to bring transport in the capital to a virtual standstill.

On February 13, 5,000 workers at BVG main and operational workshops took temporary strike action. Five days later, Verdi declared that the negotiations with management and the Senate had broken down and was forced to conduct a ballot on strike action.

On February 29, the result of the strike ballot was made known: 96.9 percent of the Verdi membership had voted in favour of an unlimited strike. For their part, the Senate and employers' association refused to back down. They were confident that Verdi could keep the situation under control, contain the dispute and prevent a confrontation with the Senate.

At the same time, the Senate intensified its attacks on the workers. Sarrazin insulted older BVG workers by declaring that they were already earning more than they were worth. Not to be left out, representatives of the Left Party then accused the strikers of “conducting their labour disputes with the West Berlin mentality that they will be handed everything on a plate and have obviously still not understood how privileged they are.”

On March 5, the long-awaited full strike by BVG workers began, and for days afterwards large sections of the city’s tram, bus and subway network were paralysed. At the same time, however, Verdi intensified its tactics of attrition. While a number of low-ranking Verdi functionaries—mainly members of the Left Party—made radical speeches, the strikers were systematically isolated.

Despite the fact that various other sections of Verdi members—shop workers, public service workers, teachers in Berlin and nursery personnel—were all involved in their own wage disputes, the union bureaucracy made no attempt to unify the different groups and organise a broad movement against the Senate. Quite the opposite: Verdi has organised only a single rally so far for the transport workers and made sure that the protest demonstration took place far removed from the town hall where the Senate is seated.

Already, at the start of the strike, BVG workers had been left isolated by the deal accepted by the train drivers’ union, the GDL, which also organises some Berlin transport workers. After a dispute lasting nearly a year, the GDL leadership capitulated to the Railways Board and the government and accepted a rotten deal just as the BVG workers were commencing their own dispute. This meant that those Berlin subway drivers organised by the GDL were not called out on strike, thus undermining the action of the rest of the workforce.

The BVG was relatively unaffected by the strike because many passengers had already purchased yearly or monthly tickets, thus limiting financial losses for the company. In an arrangement with Verdi, the BVG also closed down the subway stations, which meant that the union was not required to set up strike pickets. This made the strike resemble a lockout and denied strikers any contact with the general public. The only people to really suffer financially were the strikers and small kiosk holders in the subways.

After 12 days on strike, Verdi called for an end to the action, although the employers and the Senate had refused to make any concessions. Since then, Verdi has called pinpoint strikes for specific groups of workers—“flexible strike tactics,” according to local union negotiator Frank Bäsler—which only serve to pit one section of workers against another and wear down the workforce as a whole.

At the same time, Verdi has dropped most of its original demands. On April 4, the local employers and the union agreed on a wage increase, which was also accepted three days later by the union’s main tariff commission.

The model involves a retroactive single payment of €250 for the start of 2008 (a total of €3.1 million) followed by proportional wage rises (€22.7 million). Lower-paid workers are to receive a larger increase than higher-paid wage groups. This means that long-service workers would receive considerably less than new employees. The increase is to run over two years, although the original demand by the union was for a one-year contract.

However, Finance Senator Sarrazin promptly rejected the deal, arguing that the sums involved exceeded the financial framework he had laid down—i.e., a maximum of €25 million for a two-year period.

Shortly after midnight on April 10, more than 700 tram drivers took part in a spontaneous strike. Even Verdi negotiator Frank Bäsler was caught unawares and declared he had been “surprised” by the action. Later, Bäsler admitted, “It took some effort to stop bus and underground drivers from also striking.”

One day later, the local industrial court reacted by banning any strikes by BVG employees that are not announced 24 hours in advance. Supported by this ruling, Sarrazin asserted once again that “the entire Senate saw no room for manoeuvre with regard to a central demand”: the wage increase had to be shared out in such a way as to ensure that “relatively well-remunerated senior workers” receive much less than those recently employed. This means that the Senate is determined to enforce the deal it first struck three years ago with Verdi—i.e., to use the low wage scale agreed at that time for new starters to force down the wages of workers with longer service.

On April 16, Verdi once again threatened strike action if the employers and Senate did not come to an agreement. The union declared a “resumption of the industrial dispute” if no new offer were made before noon on April 18.

However, this “last chance” for the employers has also proved to be just hot air. As the Verdi deadline came and went, the Senate arrogantly declared that it would not respond to pressure from a new strike. The union responded by immediately declaring its readiness to negotiate. On behalf of the Senate, Sarrazin then retorted that he had no time at present to negotiate and insisted that the union respond to his demand for a substantially reduced wage increase for senior workers.

The entire course of the contract bargaining demonstrates that it is utterly impossible to conduct an effective struggle against the Senate led by a union that is not only intimately linked to the ruling parties in Berlin but also shares their political perspective. It makes absolutely clear the necessity to break with Verdi’s policy of “social partnership” and adopt a socialist perspective.



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