

Berlin transport workers vote on contract

How should workers proceed?

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Following eight weeks of industrial action, including strikes, opposition is growing amongst workers employed by the Berlin Transport Authority (BVG) as the real content emerges of the deal stuck by their trade union, Verdi, at the beginning of the month.

Many workers have already made clear that they will vote “No” on the contract in the ballot scheduled for this Monday. At the same time, there are widespread fears that the Verdi bureaucracy will win the necessary 25 percent of “Yes” votes that would usher in yet another round of declining wages and worsening working conditions.

At meetings held at depots and transport departments, Verdi functionaries have tried to persuade workers to accept the deal by placing the contract in the most favourable light. Nevertheless, all their juggling with numbers cannot hide the fact that the so-called average wage increase of 4.6 percent is a sham, or, more precisely, a deliberate deception.

The vast majority of workers with high seniority will get just 60 euros extra per month starting in August. Based on an average gross income of 2,400 euros, this amounts to a mere 2.5 percent. If one includes the 500-euro lump-sum payment for the months January to July, one arrives at an average wage increase of approximately 2.7 percent for the current year. An additional 1 percent has been agreed to for next year—but only to start in August (i.e., the increase will be 0.4 percent in 2009). Over a two-year period, this means that workers will receive a wage increase of less than 1.6 percent.

With inflation currently running at more than 3 percent, this represents a substantial cut in wages. At the same time, the readiness of Verdi to compromise will only encourage the Berlin Senate to undertake even greater attacks. Already, there are plans to renege on additional payments made to long-term workers.

The bluntness and cold-bloodedness with which Verdi functionaries have sought to justify the contract, arguing

that it would have been impossible to achieve more in light of the rigidity of the Berlin Senate (a coalition of the Social Democratic Party [SDP] and the Left Party), have already led to some angry reactions at local meetings by rank-and-file workers who declared their intention to quit the union. But Verdi has also taken precautions in this respect. Although the union’s statute stipulates a three-month notice of plans to quit the organisation, Verdi functionaries have declared that anyone leaving the union during the next year will be called upon to repay in full all strike benefits paid out in the two-month dispute!

Workers are caught in a trap. Under conditions where Verdi has organised a series of sell-outs culminating in the latest contract, the union also ensures that any worker who wants to return his membership book is heavily penalised. Ironically, some Verdi members who had left the union following previous rotten deals agreed to by the union (e.g., the TV-N contract) rejoined recently in order to qualify for strike pay. Now, they must pay more in the way of union dues than they actually received in strike benefits.

Despite the entirely justified anger and frustration felt by many workers, it is important to consider the situation soberly and objectively.

The widespread opposition against the contract can and must be transformed into a conscious movement aimed at breaking out of the union straitjacket. It is important to make the coming strike ballot the starting point of a campaign to withdraw all support for the committees headed by Verdi. Ordinary workers should ensure that the upcoming vote is properly conducted and that colleagues who enjoy the complete confidence of the workforce supervise the ballot.

Special meetings of workers should be held in workshops, depots and BVG offices to vote out the members of the Verdi negotiation committees. Where such meetings are not possible, signatures should be collected for resolutions with the same goal. At the same

time, a new strike committee should be elected from trusted workers to reorganise the struggle on the basis of its original demand—i.e., a pay increase of at least 250 euros per month.

It is no coincidence that this was the sum arrived at by the end of last year. It was calculated to restore the losses that resulted from the TV-N contract three years ago. It was also aimed at recompensing new starters who faced wage decreases of 30 percent on the basis of the TV-N deal.

Verdi's statement that there are not sufficient finances in the city treasury to satisfy the workers' original demands is simply false. One of the first acts of the Senate after taking power was to bail out the shareholders of the bankrupt Berlin Banking Corporation to the tune of 21.6 billion euros. Instead of spending taxpayers' money to bail out the speculative transactions of the rich and super-rich, these billions must be invested in urgently required social programmes and provide reasonable wages while assuring good working conditions. This requires above all a political struggle against the anti-social policies pursued by the Senate.

A new strike committee must from the outset, therefore, establish close links with all other sections of the public service and also private industry, in order to prepare a combined struggle against the Senate. Currently, some 60,000 workers employed by the Berlin authorities, Senate administration and other public institutions are preparing their own strike action, under conditions where Verdi is doing all it can to limit any action to symbolic forms of protest, divide one section of workers from another and prevent any effective struggle against the Senate.

Behind the arrogant defence of the transport workers' contract by Verdi functionaries lies the fear that any renewal of the industrial action could become the starting point for a massive movement directed against the Senate, which is deeply unpopular with Berlin's population.

Since coming to power seven years ago, the Senate has enforced a programme of aggressive savings involving cuts to a series of social gains and welfare.

In 2001, the Senate commenced the decimation of public service jobs, and 15,000 posts have since been lost. One blow followed another: withdrawal from the local employers' association, in order to bypass legal contract agreements and cut salaries by around 10 per cent; 3,000 job cuts and 10 percent wage cuts for Berlin transport workers; massive job and wage cuts in the city's hospitals; the creation of a pool of 34,000 so-called one-

euro (low-wage) jobs to replace regular jobs; drastic fee increases and reductions in personnel in nurseries and pre-schools; axing of free teaching materials in schools together with reductions in the numbers of teaching staff; cuts in funding to the city's three universities to the tune of 75 million euros; the sale of the GSW building society with 65,000 dwellings to the US speculator Cerberus. These are just a few of the austerity and anti-working class measures undertaken by the Senate.

At the same time, there is widespread opposition to such policies. A few weeks ago, 40,000 Berlin citizens signed a petition for a referendum against the privatisation of the city's water supply. The Senate has refused to reveal the content of the secret contracts it has struck guaranteeing energy companies high levels of profit. In the meantime, water prices in Berlin already exceed those in other major German cities by up to 40 percent.

The city resembles a social powder keg. For its part, Verdi is desperately attempting to isolate and suppress the various social conflicts.

Therefore, the broad opposition to the Verdi sellout of the transport strike must break free of the trade union bureaucracy to become the centre of a broad movement against the Senate. This immediately raises political demands and requires a political programme, which is diametrically opposed to the SPD and Left Party.

Both parties in the Senate, to which most Verdi functionaries belong, are part of a ruling elite determined to maintain and defend the capitalist system at the expense of the population. The struggle against such parties requires the building of a new party, which does not beg for alms but instead strives to replace capitalism with a form of society that places the needs of the working population above the profit interests of a financial oligarchy and the greed of company executives, politicians and trade union bureaucrats.

This strategy also applies in the event that Verdi gains the 25 percent of votes necessary to strangle the strike. The ballot on Monday will not end the conflicts with the Senate, and new struggles are inevitable.



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