

Large majority vote against deal following Berlin transport strike

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The response by Berlin transport (BVG) workers to the deal worked out by the Verdi union could not have been clearer. Nearly two thirds of the Verdi membership rejected the wage contract. Only 34.3 percent of those who voted agreed to accept the deal.

Nevertheless, Verdi negotiator Frank Bäsler told a press conference on Friday that the vote meant that the contract had been accepted and put an end to the months-long dispute in the German capital. According to the statutes of the union, a minority of only 25 percent of votes by union members is sufficient to accept a deal worked out by the union. This figure had been “clearly exceeded,” Bäsler told journalists.

The cold-blooded manner with which the Verdi functionaries ignore the majority vote of its members speaks volumes about the degeneration of the union. In the labour dispute the union bureaucracy had sought to avoid any real conflict with the transport workers employer—the city Senate consisting of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party. Instead the union manoeuvred against the strikers, broke off the strike at a crucial moment and watered down its original catalogue of demands.

The longest labour dispute ever conducted by BVG workers has made one thing absolutely clear: it is impossible to defend wages and working conditions on the basis of the perspective of Verdi. After nearly eight weeks on strike the union signed a contract, which in light of an inflation rate of over 3 percent entails a drastic cut in real income for the transport employees.

Long-term employees—around 85 percent of the workforce—will receive a wage increase of 2.7 percent for the current year. Next year they will receive a 1 percent increase—due to start in August, i.e., an increase of only 0.4 percent measured over the year. Based on a running time of two years, the annual increase in

income amounts to less than 1.6 percent. New starters will receive slightly more, although in past years their own wage levels had been cut by around 30 percent.

An additional element in the contract—a voucher for a working week—is merely a token gesture aimed at dressing up the deal. It does nothing to change the fact that the result of the contract for transport workers is a wage cut in real terms.

Three years ago Verdi had agreed to a contract for transport workers, which involved sharp attacks on wages and working conditions. BVG workers lost up to 12 percent of their salaries. At the same time Christmas and holiday pay was cut, and a wage scale was introduced that was aimed at splitting the workforce. From 2005 new starters received just €1,650 per month (gross). For high seniority workers this amounted to a wage cut of nearly a third.

In view of these losses transport workers were in a militant mood at the start of this year’s round of contract negotiations. However, Verdi did everything in its power to isolate, sabotage and finally sell out the strike. During the past two weeks the union bureaucracy dispatched a small army of functionaries in order to talk up the contract and secure support for the ballot held last week. The result of the vote shows that the efforts of the bureaucracy had little effect.

In the course of the dispute the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) had repeatedly warned of the dangers of a sell-out by Verdi. In a series of articles we pointed out the dense mesh of relations connecting Verdi bureaucrats to the parties organised in the Senate—the SPD and Left Party. In a leaflet, which was widely distributed amongst BVG employees, we advised workers to vote against the deal. The result of the ballot makes clear that many transport workers agreed with our assessment of the union bureaucracy.

In preparation for coming struggles transport workers must declare their lack of confidence and vote out those Verdi functionaries who agreed to the current deal and sought to continually undermine the effectiveness of the industrial action. At the same time, it is necessary to build a broad movement against the Senate and ensure that future struggles are not confined to the narrow limits imposed by the trade unions. Such a movement must take up political demands and requires the socialist program put forward by the WSWs and the Social Equality Party (PSG).



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