

Verdi agrees to sell-out in Berlin transport workers strike

Vote no on the deal!

The Editorial Board
8 May 2008

The Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all transport workers employed by the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) to examine carefully the deal signed by their union, Verdi, and vote no on the contract at the forthcoming ballot.

Eight weeks ago 97 percent of the 8,000 Verdi members employed by the BVG voted for unlimited strike action. The union's original demands included a wage increase of 12 percent for new starters and 9 percent for long service employees, with a guarantee in both cases of a minimum 250 euros extra per month.

The deal now agreed by the union can only be regarded as a slap in the face for a group of workers who have been taking one sort of industrial action or another for the past two months and have been forced to suffer a number of hardships—primarily of a financial nature through loss of wages.

The dispute was the most prolonged in the history of the BVG and also enjoyed the support of broad layers of the population in Berlin. >From the very start, however, Verdi refused to organise any effective action against the Berlin Senate, which heads the BVG board. Berlin's Senate consists of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Left Party. Strike action was repeatedly halted, with the union leadership determined to de-escalate and sabotage their members' struggle.

The timing of the publication of the new contract is also deliberate. Verdi is determined to prevent joint action between transport workers and other public employees in conflict with the Berlin Senate. While BVG workers recommence work as usual this week, 60,000 other local authority workers begin their own strike action next week.

The proposed contract applies retroactively from January 1, 2008, and lasts two years. Verdi has gone to great lengths to spread as much confusion as possible about the real content of the contract and sought to play up its benefits in press reports. According to Verdi, the Senate was forced to yield more in the way of finances than it originally planned, i.e., the BVG must spend an additional 28.3 million euros for personnel over the next two years—4.3 million euros more than originally announced.

The contract involves a graduated wage increase of an average 4.6 percent for all employees, plus a single lump sum payment of 500 euros and a credit voucher amounting to a week's work.

Verdi representative Andreas Splanemann told the *Berliner Zeitung* last weekend: "Anyone who has noticed how tough the

conflict was, especially with Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin, will recognise the result." And Thomas Tschet, who heads the union group responsible for subway workers, added that, even with a longer strike, it would have been impossible to achieve more.

A careful examination of the contract reveals that such remarks are nothing other than part of deliberate campaign of disinformation.

Three years ago Verdi agreed a deal with the Berlin Senate (TV-N contract) that involved wage cuts of up to 12 percent for BVG workers together with increased productivity and worsened working conditions. Holiday benefits were cut and a new pay scale introduced which divided the workforce, pitting new starters against long service employees. New starters, i.e., those employed after 2005, receive just 1,650 euro per month. This represented a lowering of wages amounting to around 30 percent compared to long service employees.

The latest contract now deliberately uses the low wages of new starters to further undermine the wages of longer term employees. According to Verdi, new employees will receive a 100-euro increase per month from August this year. Based on a starting wage of 1,650 euros, this amounts to 6.1 percent—a figure that Verdi now celebrates as a success.

Long service workers at the top end of the pay scale receive just 60 euros more. Based on an average income of 2,400 euros, this amounts to an increase of 2.5 per cent. Verdi has then combined the salary increase for both groups to arrive at an average increase of 4.6 percent.

What the union fails to point out, however, is that the proportion of senior personnel to new starters is not 50:50 but rather 85:15. This means that the vast majority of employees will receive an amount which not only bears no relation to their original demand, but does not even cover the rising cost of living.

The second deceit on the part of Verdi is its claim that the lump sum payment of 500 euros is an "extra" payment. In fact, the new contract is due to start in August this year and the 500 euros is a lump sum to cover the period from January to July. Divided by seven, this amounts to just 71 euros per month. In the form of a lump sum payment a large part of this sum will be claimed in tax, leaving transport workers with even less—an estimated 2 or 3 percent for these seven months depending on tax rating.

The third element in this sham is the claim of an extra 1 percent

increase in the second year of the deal. This is also false! According to the contract, there will be no extra payment from January to July 2009. The additional one percent begins in August 2009 and lasts for the next five months. Based on an entire year this amounts to the ridiculous sum of a 0.4 percent increase for 2009. With inflation currently averaging more than three percent (for food and energy this figure is much higher), this represents a real wage cut.

The union has also added a further element in an attempt to cover over the disastrous deal it has struck with the Berlin Senate. All Verdi members are to receive a voucher equivalent to a week's work. But the point of the transport workers strike was to receive more money—not free time. Since the introduction of the TV-N contract three years ago, most BVG workers have suffered losses amounting to several hundred euros per month. These losses are now compounded by the wages lost during the two-month dispute.

Verdi is also seeking to deceive its members with regard to the total cost of the package and has neglected to mention that the sum of 28.3 million that the Senate will pay for the deal also includes employer contributions for social security.

Despite the strike, the deal struck by Verdi for Berlin transport workers is considerably less than the contract awarded some weeks ago to other groups of public service workers who are represented by the same union.

The biggest lie perpetuated by Verdi is its claim that, in light of the obstinacy of Finance Senator Thilo Sarrazin (SPD), "It was not possible to get more!" This turns reality on its head. It was only possible for Sarrazin to adopt such a provocative and arrogant stance because he knew he could rely on Verdi's support.

For years Sarrazin has worked closely with union representatives on the board of the BVG. Sarrazin is not only a member of the same party as the head of personnel at the BVG, Lothar Zweiniger. It was Zweiniger who organized Sarrazin's rise to political prominence through his trade union connections and Zweiniger remains a member of Verdi to this day.

The national chairman of the Verdi public service trade union, Frank Bsirske, played a key role in the implementation of the TV-N contract three years ago and has supported a number of other measures worked out by Sarrazin to cut back Berlin's welfare net. A few years ago Bsirske's wife, Bettina Jankovsky, took up a lucrative post as an advisor to the BVG earning a salary four times as much as a normal employee.

There is a dense web of connections linking Verdi to the management of the BVG and the Senate parties, the SPD and Left Party, and this latest miserable contract results from the fact that Verdi is utterly unwilling to conduct any serious struggle against the Senate.

Verdi only organised industrial action in the first place as a means of placating its membership, which had made clear it was no longer prepared to tolerate low wages and threatened to quit the union. However, just at the point when the strike was having an effect and hitting the employers hard during the Easter holiday period, Verdi broke off the strike and drastically retreated from its original demands, although the Senate and management had refused to make the slightest concession.

Driving personnel were called upon to restart work, while

workers in the workshops, technology departments and administration were told to continue striking. This served to divide the strikers. It led to a decline in the number of functioning buses and increased pressure on drivers, who were confronted with passengers angry at the reduced service. As a last straw Verdi called bus drivers out on strike last week, although tram and subway drivers continued to work.

The rotten deal is not due to the strength of the Senate, but rather to the systematic sabotage of the strike by Verdi. In the course of eight weeks the union organised just one demonstration and made sure it took place far away from the town hall—the seat of the Senate. The reasoning behind such a strategy is simple: the majority of Verdi functionaries are members of the same parties which form the Senate and support their politics.

Many transport workers are indignant about the deal and a number had already protested against the winding down of the strike before Easter. Now it is necessary to combine this resistance and organize a conscious struggle against the union's strategy of sabotage.

Verdi has announced a ballot to decide on the contract to be held May 19-22. In the intervening days the union is intent on silencing any opposition. For their part workers should use this time to overcome the isolation of members as a result of the union's actions and organise an effective opposition to the contract and the opportunist policies of Verdi.

The strike was not in vain. It demonstrated the militancy of workers and it contains important lessons for the future. The determination of Verdi to sabotage the strike is clear evidence of the turn to the right by the trade unions—a process which can be seen all over the world, where the trade unions act as a tool of big business and governments to enforce wage and welfare cuts.

Against a background of growing economic and social crisis the ruling elite is determined to save their system at the expense of the population at large and regard any demand for reasonable wages and conditions of work as a threat. For their part the trade unions are pledged to maintain the bourgeois order and their own role as co-partner of management in the worked out German system of social partnership. In this role they are increasingly antagonistic to the justified demands put forward by growing numbers of workers. It is this perspective of defending capitalist relations and conditions that links the union to the SPD and Left Party.

The struggle against the sell-out organised by Verdi is therefore bound up with the building of a new party, which fights on the basis of an international socialist program. This is the aim of the *World Socialist Website* and the Socialist Equality Party (PSG).

The WSWS calls on BVG workers to make contact with our Editorial Board and organise meetings and discussion aimed at coordinating opposition to the rotten compromise agreed by Verdi. Send your mails to wsws@gleichheit.de.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact