

Berlin transport workers' strike

The WSWs editorial board replies to a Verdi shop steward

Ulrich Rippert
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On May 7, the WSWs posted a statement (in German) on the Berlin transport workers' strike, urging workers to reject the contract proposal agreed to by the Verdi union leadership. The statement was posted in English May 8: "Verdi agrees to sell-out in Berlin transport workers strike—Vote no on the deal!"

In reply, Verdi shop steward Ulf von Mach wrote a two-page letter that sharply disagreed with the statement and defended the union's position.

We post von Mach's letter below and a response from Ulrich Rippert on behalf of the WSWs editorial board.

Dear editorial board,

Please allow me to answer briefly your article of May 7, 2008.

As for myself: I am a Verdi shop steward from the streetcar technical department. In this function I was—apparently unlike yourselves—permanently in contact with or actually involved in the basic decisions and practical activities relating to the strike. This is one more reason why I am so annoyed about this article, which, apart from tendentious presentation and polemic, also presents the facts incorrectly.

Paragraph 3/25/29

False: "Strike action was repeatedly halted, with the union leadership determined to de-escalate and sabotage their members' struggle."

Correct: Changes were repeatedly made in strike tactics in accordance with the resolutions passed by the extended negotiating committee comprising approximately 100 persons from all the different sectors of the BVG [Berlin transport authority]. There were not only reductions, but also intensifications. For example, the beginning of the strike was suddenly changed from February 2 to February 1 following the disgraceful offer made by the employer's side.

Paragraph 9/10

Tendentious presentation: "...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...." "The latest contract now deliberately uses the low wages of new starters to further undermine the wages of longer term employees...."

Correct: TV-N- degradations were necessary and had been co-ordinated with members (strike ballot); otherwise the existence of the enterprise was threatened by putting out tenders.

Paragraph 13:

Polemic: "...The second deceit on the part of Verdi is its claim that the lump sum payment of 500 euros is an 'extra' payment...."

Correct: This payment takes place according to the correctly indicated pay increases of 100 [for newer workers]—60 euro [for those with more seniority] starting from August 1, '08.

Paragraph 13:

Polemic: "...a large part of this sum will be claimed in tax...."

Correct: The tax deduction takes place automatically in December via the BVG pay service. The payment was specified by point I.2 of the wage agreement to begin in the month in which the fiscal deduction from losses due to the strike from April becomes effective.

Paragraph 19:

Polemic: "...It was only possible for Sarrazin to adopt such a provocative and arrogant stance because he knew he could rely on Verdi's support."

Correct: Every strike activity was based on the resolutions of the extended contract commission, and I never heard even a murmur of support for Sarrazin from the colleagues present.

Paragraph 23:

False: "...However, just at the point when the militancy of the strike was having an effect and hitting the employers hard during the Easter holiday period, Verdi broke off the strike...."

Correct: The "militancy" within the BVG took the form that massive support by trade unionists from other departments was necessary to prevent a breakdown of the strike, or even strike-breaking. Suspension of the strike at Easter was decided by the majority of representatives from all sectors, because "militancy" had collapsed due to the necessity to turn out on Easter Friday and Monday in order to qualify for strike benefit, while workers also had their eye on holiday bonuses.

Paragraph 25:

Polemic: "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...."

True: Despite the incentive of strike benefits, only approximately 1,000 out of 8,000 striking trade unionists could be lured to the demo and demonstration in the Landsberger Alle—Petersburgerstraße and the extended contract commission concluded that a demonstration in front of the city hall made no sense.

Paragraph 28:

Your call for workers 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" is completely unrealistic, and you—despite some common political estimations—appear to be mere salon revolutionaries.

All in all, I am forced to conclude that you just want to score points for your party with your polished rhetoric.

Your false presentation of the events, and above all your false estimation of the level of militancy, is testimony to your lack of knowledge of the real mood of all employees.

Perhaps, then, the voluntary representatives of employees from all sectors of the enterprise are more competent. It would probably be better for these to decide on any further action instead of your advice as to how

trade unionists should vote in the ballot!

A rejection of the deal undoubtedly means that one must reckon with an unlimited industrial dispute with an uncertain result.

With militant greetings,

Ulf von Mach

Verdi shop steward

Dear Mr. von Mach,

You criticise our assessment of the Verdi contract and state that “facts” are incorrectly represented in our statement. However, in your letter of May 10, you fail to refute a single point of our analysis.

You only refer directly to the results of the negotiation in two places. You consciously defend the misleading formulation by Verdi that the 500-euro lump-sum payment awarded represents an “additional” payment. You write: “This payment takes place according to the correctly indicated pay increases of 100 [for newer workers]—60 euro [for those with more seniority] starting from August 1, ’08.”

The old contract had already run out, however, at the end of last year. You thereby confirm indirectly our statement that the 500-euro single payment is merely a form of compensation for the months January to July, for which no other increase has been awarded.

You also confirm that the single payment results in higher tax deduction and refer to a special agreement made regarding this question. This does nothing to alter the presentation of the facts made in our statement.

When calculated over a seven-month period (January to July), the lump-sum payment amounts to about 71 euros per month. For senior workers with an average gross income of between 2,300 and 2,500 euros, this means a pay increase of between 2.5 and 3.0 percent. Over a seven-month period, workers will receive an increase that is less than the rate of inflation and represents a real wage cut.

In your letter, you make no mention of the other shabby tricks used by Verdi to mislead transport workers and present the contract in the best possible light.

Verdi argues as follows: at the beginning of August, new starters will get a monthly increase of around 100 euros. For new starters earning 1,650 euros, this represents an increase of 6.1 percent. Workers with seniority will receive an increase of just 60 euros. Based on an average gross income for such workers of 2,400 euro, this represents a miserly 2.5 percent increase. Verdi has then added together new starters and long-term workers to declare that the average wage increase is 4.6 per cent. This is nothing less than conscious deception!

Verdi has neglected to mention that the ratio of senior employees to new workers is not 50:50, but rather 85:15. The vast majority of long-term employees, many of whom have worked for the company for decades, are to be fobbed off with a wage increase of 2.5 percent.

Their situation will be even worse next year. Verdi gives the impression that transport workers will receive an additional 1 percent next year—i.e., 4.6 percent plus 1.0 percent in total. In reality, no new money will be made available for the months January-July 2009, and then just 1 percent is provided for the five months from August to December. Our assessment—“Based on an entire year this amounts to the ridiculous sum of a 0.4 percent increase for 2009”—is therefore entirely correct.

The fact that you agreed to such a deal in your function as a member of the negotiating committee is unacceptable and completely disqualifies you from claiming to represent the interests of transport workers. However, you go further and proceed to insult the strikers. You state that the strike had to be wound down before the Easter holidays “because ‘militancy’ had collapsed due to the necessity to turn out on Easter Friday and Monday in order to qualify for strike benefit, while workers also had their eye on holiday bonuses.”

That is a slanderous attack on the large majority of strikers who were enraged at the decision of the strike committee to wind down the strike at a crucial moment. Are you trying to argue that the strikers agreed to, or

even demanded, the whittling down of the original demands that led to the strike?

We know that furious union members at the time sent e-mails to the Verdi strike committee but never got any answer. It is no doubt the case in Verdi, as in many other unions, that members of the strike committee receive full compensation for lost wages during an industrial dispute—unlike ordinary members. Now you have the nerve to attack strikers who suffered significant losses in income to pursue the strike!

In your letter, you also claim that strikers expressed no interest in holding a demonstration in front of the Berlin city hall (seat of the Senate). This is a lie. Participants at the only demonstration organised by the union, in the suburb of Friedrichshain, told WSWs reporters that many depots had received little information about the planned action. They also made the point that a demonstration in front of the city hall would have been much more effective. Even Verdi negotiator Franc Bäsler felt obligated to respond to widespread pressure and declared at the demonstration that the union was considering further action, including a protest in front of the city hall.

It was not the strikers who sought to avoid a confrontation with the Berlin Senate (composed of a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party), but rather the strike committee and its backers in the Verdi bureaucracy.

Your statement “TV-N- degradations were necessary...otherwise the existence of the enterprise was threatened” is also false. This is exactly the argument used by the Berlin finance minister Theo Sarrazin and the Senate, which declare that the only way to prevent privatisation of the transport system is to agree to wage and benefit cuts. This argument is absurd and similar to suicide motivated by a fear of death.

In reality, wage and benefit cuts by the state are an integral part of the preparation for privatisation—as was the case recently with the privatisation of Berlin’s water supply. At the same time, union officials are regularly rewarded for their efforts to dismantle social conditions with management posts. The head of the Berlin transport authority (BVG), Lothar Zweiniger, was formerly deputy chair of Verdi in the state of Lower Saxony. Norbert Schmidt, personnel manager for the Berlin Water Company, was formerly a leading functionary in the public service trade union ÖTV (now part of Verdi). Manfred Rompf, personnel chief of Vivantes [hospital group] in Berlin, was formerly a chairman for Verdi in the state of Hessian. This list could be extended at will.

Just in the last few days, the chairman of Transnet, the rail trade union, Norbert Hansen, swapped sides and joined the executive committee of Deutsche Bahn (German Railways).

There are already rumours that the BVG is about to award Frank Bäsler a leading management post in recognition of his services to the company during the recent dispute. In his function as a Verdi official, he already earns three or four times as much as the ordinary bus driver.

You know all this, but have nothing to say about such cases of corruption in your letter.

Your entire line of reasoning expresses the complacency and arrogance of a union apparatus that is financed by its members but exclusively defends its own interests. Under conditions where the ruling political and business elite subordinate all aspects of society to their own profit interests and promote personal enrichment, the trade union bureaucracy sees its job as restraining the working class with the help of a bureaucratic straitjacket and defending bourgeois social relations.

In our opinion, it is high time to challenge the opportunist policies of Verdi and the other trade unions. We therefore call upon all transport workers to vote down the proposed contract at the ballot next Monday.

You say: “A rejection of the deal undoubtedly means that one must reckon with an unlimited industrial dispute with an uncertain result.” This is also mistaken! Should a majority vote down the contract at the ballot, the workforce has to ensure that the old strike committee is not allowed to

lead the dispute into a dead end “with an uncertain result.” Instead, special meetings of strikers must be called aimed at settling accounts with and replacing the old strike committee and contract negotiators. A new strike committee and negotiation committee must be elected that are exclusively answerable to the workers involved and undertake to work closely with all other sections of public service workers in a joint campaign against the Berlin Senate.

In light of the latest sell-out organised by Verdi, many BVG employees are turning their back on the trade union bureaucracy. This is a process we welcome and that urgently calls for new political leadership!

Yours sincerely,

Ulrich Rippert

On behalf of the WSWs editorial board



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact