

Germany: Outrage over Verdi's sellout at Lufthansa

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5 August 2008

Many employees have greeted the contract accepted by the Verdi trade union from the management of Lufthansa airlines last Friday with expressions of outrage and indignation. In particular, airline mechanics expressed their opposition to the deal and the conduct of their strike by Verdi. One airline mechanic from the city of Munich, who had been a union member for many decades, told *Spiegel-Online*: “Yes, now I am now definitely going to resign.”

According to the *Spiegel* report, the level of strike participation by mechanics in Munich was nearly 100 percent, but hardly any of the mechanics had a good word to say about the contract or the union. “The result did not merit going on strike. When one takes into account the high rate of inflation, there will not be much left over,” was the comment of another mechanic.

When the head of Verdi in Munich, Heinrich Birner, presented the results of the negotiations with management, he was met with ridicule on the part of his members. At the same time, he sought to play off one occupational group against the other. “You have the right to vote no,” he said. Verdi members will vote later this week on the deal. But at the same time, Birner made it clear that Verdi is determined to impose the contract in the face of widespread opposition from the membership.

Birner was confident that the union would receive the approval of the contract by 25 percent of the membership—which is all that is necessary to ratify agreements and end industrial disputes—because, according to the union, other Lufthansa employees such as check in-personnel were content with the result.

Just one week ago, 90 percent of Verdi members employed by Lufthansa voted to go on strike. The strike ballot was in response to the demand by the union for a wage increase of 9.8 percent to run over 12 months.

The contract agreed to by Verdi at the end of last week is a blow to all Lufthansa employees. The contract envisages a pay increase for this year of 5.1 percent and a further 2.3 percent for 2009—with the entire contract due to run over 21 months. The deal accepted by Verdi is only minimally more

than the offer of 6.7 percent over 21 months submitted by Lufthansa before the strike.

In light of rising prices—in particular, the high cost of energy and food—the contract barely covers the current rate of inflation. And this, although Lufthansa employees have been confronted with stagnating wages in recent years.

The Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* calls upon all Lufthansa employees to vote no in the imminent contract ballot and reject the deal worked out by the service trade union, Verdi.

Verdi has done its best to talk up the deal. According to Verdi negotiator Erhard Ott: “We have reached a result, which is acceptable.” In fact, Verdi systematically limited the strike action from the start. It signalled to management that it was prepared to make substantial concessions and would avoid harming the enterprise. From a total membership of 50,000 spread across the country, only 5,000 Verdi members were involved in the strike action.

Despite the limited number of workers drawn into the action, the strike began to bite after three days. Increasing numbers of flights were cancelled due to lack of maintenance of aircraft by mechanics who are especially heavily organised in the union. It was precisely at this point that Verdi broke off the strike and struck a rotten compromise. If Verdi had continued the strike in the middle of the summer holiday period, Lufthansa would have suffered substantial losses and the workers would have been far better placed to obtain an improved deal.

The employer's side echoed Verdi, using exactly the same words to describe the deal—a “justifiable result.” The Lufthansa spokesman, however, went on to stress that the increased costs for the airline would be retrieved through increased productivity. In other words, the company is already planning how to recover its increased costs through intensified work schedules. The German business associations were also happy with the deal. “The rapid agreement is the most favourable for all those involved,” said Oliver Stettes from the German Economic Institute (IW) in Cologne.

Should 25 percent of Verdi members vote in favour of the deal in the balloting due to begin this Wednesday, then the contract will immediately be imposed upon ground personnel. The contract will not be automatically valid, however, for the 14,000 cabin crewmembers organised in Verdi. The rival trade union, UFO, has more members amongst cabin crew personnel than Verdi. When the Verdi deal was announced, functionaries of UFO declared that they regarded the settlement as too low and that UFO would continue to press for a 15 percent increase for its members. The separate contract between Lufthansa and UFO runs out at the end of the year—and a renewed industrial conflict is in the cards.

In recent years, many Verdi members have quit the union to join the rival unions, Cockpit and UFO. Most Lufthansa pilots are organised in Cockpit, and the majority of cabin personnel in UFO. The shift to the new unions is bound up with the succession of miserable pay deals negotiated by Verdi in the past. It was competition from these other trade unions that led to Verdi conducting industrial action in the first place.

Lufthansa is keen to impose the same deal for all of its workers, and further negotiations will be carried out in the coming weeks to this end. Verdi has already announced its readiness for discussions with both Lufthansa management and with representatives of UFO. In such discussions, the job of Verdi is to act as an extended arm of management and put pressure on UFO to accept the pay settlement already negotiated.

In this respect, airline workers should recall the role played recently by the two rail unions, Transnet and GDBA, which both accepted a low wage increase from the management of German Rail (DB) and then sought to impose the same deal on train drivers organised in the GDL trade union, who were demanding pay increases of more than 30 percent and their own separate contract. In the course of the yearlong strike by train drivers, Transnet and GDBA worked increasingly closer together with the DB management to isolate the train drivers.

The trade unions have a history of betraying their members' interests at Lufthansa. At the start of the 1990s, two public service unions (ÖTV and DAG), which later amalgamated to become part of Verdi, agreed to restructuring measures at Lufthansa involving wage cuts, increased productivity and worsened working conditions. The restructuring programme was part of management's plan for the privatisation of the company.

At that time, union representatives sat on the supervisory board of the company and cooperated closely with management. The former leader of the ÖTV public workers' union, Monika Wulf Mathies, sat on the board of Lufthansa

for 17 years—for a number of years as deputy chairman. She used her position to implement the company restructuring programme in the face of broad opposition from the workforce.

Her replacement as deputy chairman on the Lufthansa supervisory board is the national chairman of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, who has made no secret of his pro-management affiliation.

Just prior to the start of the airline workers strike, Bsirske flew by Lufthansa first class for a five-week holiday in the South Seas. Bsirske's flight, which usually costs between 5,000 and 10,000 euros, was paid for by the company. Bsirske also refused to break off his holiday as the strike commenced. According to trade union circles, Bsirske's behaviour was "not unusual."

However, ordinary trade union members saw things differently and correctly assessed Bsirske's free luxury flight as a clear indication to management that the Verdi leadership was ready to make concessions. Bsirske's behaviour was so provocative that even some members of his political party—the Greens—felt obliged to utter a word of caution. The manager of the Green Party's parliamentary faction, Thea Dückert, spoke mildly of a "lack of sensitivity" on the part of her "colleague."

At the same time, Bsirske has received the backing of other high-ranking trade union functionaries. The former chairman of the German trade union federation, Ursula Engelen Kefer, told *Welt-online*: "I have come to know Frank Bsirske as someone, who has actively intervened on behalf of his members. He was always prepared to set aside his own personal interests."

However, such attempts to defend the image of the trade union boss cannot hide the fact that Verdi is ever more openly functioning as a direct accomplice of management and the government, and in so doing is being confronted with increasing resistance from its members.



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