

PSG member stands for staff council at Berlin Urban Transit Company

Our reporter
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Six months after workers took mass strike action at the Berlin Urban Transit Company (BVG), elections are being held for representatives to the Personalrat (staff council). The experiences of the strike and the role of the trade union ver.di, which imposed a sell-out despite workers' readiness to fight, are still the subject of discussion among the workers.

During the strike, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) and the World Socialist Web Site exposed the role played by ver.di and called on workers to break free of the control of the union. The PSG proposed the formation of an independent strike committee to enable workers to take the leadership of the strike in their own hands.

Andreas Niklaus is now standing as a candidate for the Personalrat on this basis. Niklaus is a member of the PSG National Committee. He has worked at the BVG for 17 years and is currently employed as a bus driver.

We publish his manifesto below.

Why I am standing as a candidate for the staff council

My name is Andreas Niklaus. I work at the BVG as a bus driver, based at the Müllerstrasse depot. I am asking for your support and would like to explain why I am standing as a candidate for the staff council.

The most important issue is the uncompromising defence of our jobs and the struggle for decent wages for all. I wish to stress from the start that I am completely opposed to the deliberate fragmentation of BVG workers into different subsidiaries with different conditions and working hours. Moreover, working conditions and safety must be urgently improved.

I believe the policies of the management and the unions, together with the austerity measures of the Berlin city government, are completely irresponsible.

The introduction of the BSU 2000 savings programme and the creation of the Berlin Transport (BT) subsidiary established a new low-wage sector in the German capital. But as if that were not enough, three years ago the Berlin Senate, under the leadership of the Left Party and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), along with ver.di and union Chairman Frank Bsirske, agreed to the TV-N Berlin contract. This established yet another low-wage sector.

This agreement was pushed through against us only by means of rotten manoeuvres, and has led to wage reductions of up to 12 percent.

The introduction of the TV-N contract, which enshrines lower

wages for all newly-hired workers, is a new nadir in the treachery of ver.di. All of the well-paid union functionaries have openly sided with management. This became absolutely clear in the strike this spring.

The strike and the role of ver.di

The starting point for the dispute was mounting discontent with a continually declining standard of living. Many workers were simply no longer prepared to accept further losses in their real wages, negotiated by management, the Berlin Senate and the union. While fares have risen in recent years—allegedly due to our wage increases—our working conditions have deteriorated and wages have fallen substantially. Personnel costs amounting to €885 million in 1997 have since dropped to €482 million.

References to an “increase in productivity” only mask the fact that we have to work longer shifts, with unpaid breaks, that the pressure of work is rising intolerably, and that we face the anger of furious passengers.

And this is set to continue. The contract between ver.di and the Senate agreed in December of 2007 means even further cuts in personnel costs.

Starting in 2009, BVG will receive just €250 million per year in subsidies. With debts of almost €1 billion, management is already discussing further cuts. What is being prepared is the dismantling of so-called safeguards for longer-standing employees.

Even before the strike, thousands of members had left ver.di. According to official figures, the number of ver.di members sank to under 6,000, just 50 percent of the workforce. Ten years ago, ver.di could boast that almost 80 percent of the workforce was organized in its ranks.

Fearing a further decrease in membership—at least 500 BVG and BT workers transferred in the spring to the train drivers union GDL—and fearing wildcat strikes, ver.di functionaries decided to mount an industrial dispute and issued a relatively high wage demand, 12 percent, which is a minimum increase of at least €250 for all workers.

But from the outset, ver.di had no intention of fighting for this demand, which would have sent out a signal to all other branches of the public sector. Instead, the BVG workers were to be

discouraged and their militancy broken.

The union's strike tactics were designed not to put pressure on management and the Senate, but to demoralise strikers and the entire workforce.

The action began with an all-out strike, which meant substantial financial losses for all strikers, while much of BVG's income was covered through sales of prepaid monthly and annual season tickets. Despite widespread popular support, ver.di did not expand the struggle into other branches of the public sector, which were also in dispute with the Senate.

Instead, the strike was broken off after twelve days without any consultation, and the union's demands were drastically reduced.

In the end, we were forced to accept a settlement that meant a substantial cut in real wages. The staggered pay rises awarded to longer-serving staff over the next two years equate to an average annual increase of less than 1.6 percent. More recently hired staff, who already earn a third less than the "old hands," will see only a slightly higher increase.

Who has negotiated and signed on to this rotten contract? The union.

Ver.di is also in cahoots with the SPD and Left Party, who run the Berlin city government. It was no accident that the union refused to organize a single demonstration of BVG members against their employer—the Senate residing in city hall.

Ver.di supports the aim of the city administration to make urban transit "marketable."

This is a policy that can be seen world-wide and is positively encouraged by the European Union, putting pressure on our wages and working conditions. The EU is demanding that the urban transit market be opened up to private enterprises and investors.

To implement this policy, BVG boss Andreas Sturmowski received a basic salary in 2007 of €290,000, plus €87,000 in a profit-sharing bonus. It would take an ordinary BVG employee six to eighteen years' hard work to earn the same amount.

New struggles are approaching

The current financial crisis is intensifying the situation. The same politicians who argue that the coffers are empty and demand sacrifices from workers are offering the banks almost unlimited sums in a bailout. Preparations are being made to place the whole burden of the crisis onto the backs of ordinary working people.

We must prepare for new struggles. A central lesson of the strike is that as long as our struggle remains under the control of the unions, it is doomed to failure.

I believe it is an urgent necessity to break with the opportunist politics of the unions and prepare to take control of coming disputes.

This is why I am standing as an independent candidate.

It is my goal, together with interested colleagues, to develop a BVG workers group whose demands and programme are oriented exclusively at defending and advancing the interests of the workforce.

I am advancing the following demands:

1. The cancelling of the TV-N contract
2. Equal wages for equal work in every enterprise and every department—the same wage for doing the same job, regardless whether you are an "old hand" or newly hired
3. The dissolution of the BT, with the workforce taken into employment by BVG with no loss of income
4. Compensation for inflation
5. A drastic reduction in salary for all managers to a reasonable level comparable to other staff
6. Full disclosure of the contracts between the insolvent American company AIG and BVG

We should discuss these demands and wider issues outside the workplace. Social life is becoming increasingly intolerable for us, as it is for the majority of the population.

The present financial crisis shows clearly that capitalism and the profit system have failed.

As a socialist, I stand for an alternative form of society in which social equality is the highest principle, not profit and personal enrichment. As a workers' representative on the staff council the interests of the workforce and passengers will be my highest priority. To those who respond with the argument that such a socialist perspective is unrealistic, I maintain that what failed in former East Germany and the USSR was not socialism, but Stalinism.

Finally, colleagues, I want to stress the following:

My candidacy represents a new course and I am not making any cheap promises. I have no illusions in the unions. Transferring to another union is not a solution. The train drivers union GDL stabbed us in the back right at the beginning of our strike. By giving way to the pressure of the bosses and breaking the train drivers strike, the GDL ensured that the S-bahn (rapid-transit railways) began operating again on the very day we launched our own strike.

As things currently stand, I know that if I am elected I will be in a minority on many staff council decisions. I regard all those colleagues who support these demands as my allies. I will report regularly on the discussions and decisions of the staff council, so that you can develop your own view on the conduct of all the members of the staff council.

On this basis, I ask for your vote in the staff council election.

Moreover, I call on all those who support the demands I raise in my program to discuss these questions and develop a new and independent BVG workers group.

I am convinced that this will send a signal to all transit workers, not only here in Berlin, but far beyond the borders of Germany.



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