

Trade union and employers work together to break German ground crew strike

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24 February 2012

On Wednesday, the GdF trade union declared it would end the strike of ground crew at Frankfurt airport that has resulted in the cancellation of more than a thousand flights since the start of the strike last Thursday. The decision came following a letter from the airport company management Fraport offering talks to the striking workers.

The air traffic controllers' union (GdF), which represents the 200 ground crew in Frankfurt who guide aircraft to their parking positions, originally announced that it planned to strike until the end of the week. In response, Fraport management stated it was prepared for a "long strike".

On Tuesday, the business newspaper *Handelsblatt* praised Fraport CEO Stefan Schulte, a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) member with close links to the conservative Hesse state government, who also works closely with the Verdi public services trade union. His motto is "stand firm", writes the *Handelsblatt* approvingly, and specifies: "No compromise offer, no concessions, not even a hint of understanding".

The provocative behaviour of Fraport AG has not only been agreed on with Verdi, but the union proposed and worked out this line in the first place. Verdi is the biggest union among the nearly 20,000 employees working at the airport and insists on its sole right of representation.

Three years ago, Verdi agreed to a so-called future contract with Fraport, which imposed austerity measures on airport workers totalling €24 million (US\$32 million). Verdi wants to avoid at all costs that runway controllers and their relatively small union (GdF) win higher wages and improved working conditions. This would then make it more difficult for Verdi to maintain its own low-wage

contract policy.

One of the hardliners in the Fraport executive is Works Director Herbert Mai. For decades, he was a functionary for the trade union OTV (Union of Public Services, Transport and Traffic, a forerunner of Verdi) and from 1995 to 2000 its chairman. After he was defeated in a vote at a union congress, he moved to the employers' camp and became a member of the board of Fraport AG where he receives an annual salary of more than €1 million. The company's annual report for 2010 specified his salary at €970,600 (\$1.3 million). In addition, he received company shares worth €57,285.

In the *Focus* magazine, Mai attacked strikers with the words: "What the GdF demands is a completely unacceptable increase in salaries. We could not possible agree, because it is not defensible for the other 20,000 employees."

Verdi secretary Gerold Schaub argues in similar manner. He accuses the GdF of jeopardising smooth operations at the airport. A small minority of 200 people are trying to "enrich themselves at the expense of others", he said. Schaub called upon the Fraport executive to withdraw "its already excessive offer" to the GdF. This is exactly what Verdi had called for in a leaflet. It should be noted that Schaub also receives money from Fraport in addition to his exorbitant union salary. As vice chairman of the company supervisory committee, Schaub received €31,450 in 2010 (according to the annual company report)

The chairperson of the airport works council, Claudia Amier, also attacked the strikers. In an interview with *Financial Times Germany*, she echoed the line of the employer, Fraport, and Director Mai: "A small group of employees is using its monopoly position to achieve rates

out of any dimension and which are completely out of proportion,” she said.

The only description for the actions of Verdi and its shop stewards is strike-breaking. Edgar Stejskal, the company works council chairman, has also agitated against the strikers on television, declaring that they showed a lack of solidarity with other Fraport employees and made completely unrealistic and excessive wage demands at the expense of the vast majority of staff—all this from a man who pockets €28,750 paid from the company’s accounts.

In reality, the demands of the strikers are completely justified. Ground crews carry out high-responsibility, difficult and nerve-racking work. The requirements for such ground crews are particularly complex and demanding at Frankfurt airport.

Fraport has deliberately provoked the strike with the runway ground crew in order to defeat them and strengthen the control of airport workers by Verdi. This is clear from a brief look at the background and history of the strike.

Pilots and controllers at Frankfurt Airport have long been demanding they be treated on equal terms with their colleagues in Munich or Berlin. They are also calling for a contract that lasts four years.

Their current demands are the result of a settlement following arbitration talks led by the former Hamburg CDU mayor, Ole von Beust, who was selected for the talks by Fraport AG itself. The arbitrator accepted the workers’ claims in his settlement. The current strike is therefore aimed at enforcing this judgment. It was Fraport AG that rejected the arbitration award and thus provoked the strike.

Fraport has evidently made intensive preparations to break the strike, involving crash courses for technicians and other employees, mostly from middle management, even at the risk of accidents on the runways. Fraport AG has announced every day that it is able to cope with a large proportion of the flights without the runway personnel. In the event that longer waiting times ensue, the company has made military beds available for hundreds of passengers.

The intention of Fraport management, together with

Verdi, to bring the strikers to their knees and set an example by crushing so-called sector unions is clear from a recent statement by the president of the German Employers’ Association, Dieter Hundt. He joined in the propaganda against the runway ground crew strike and demanded that the government rapidly introduce legislation to curb sector unions.

Hundt sharply criticised the strikers at Frankfurt. “The runway workers are abusing the decision of the Federal Labour Court in the summer of 2010, in which the court overturned the principle of collective bargaining”, Hundt told the *Bild* newspaper.

He accused the small occupational group of airport employees of blackmail in order to achieve “selfish wage increases of as much as 50-70 percent.... If the legislature does not act soon to restore unity there is the threat of copycat offenders”, Hundt said.

Eighteen months ago, Hundt, together with the chairman of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Michael Sommer, had sought to enshrine in law the principle of “one company, one union” and thereby guarantee a monopoly for the DGB. The Federal Labour Court decided against it at the time. This gave smaller trade unions and professional associations such as the medical association Marburger Bund, the pilots ‘union Cockpit, the train drivers’ union GdL, and GdF more leeway to operate.

Now, the employers are determined to overturn this state of affairs in order to strengthen the control of the DGB trade unions. This is the significance of the current strike by ground crew workers at Frankfurt airport.



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