

German employers, courts, trade unions seek to crush airport ground crew strike

Helmut Arens, Ulrich Rippert
1 March 2012

Within the space of 24 hours, a German labour court has issued two injunctions aimed at crushing a strike by ground crew, represented by the air traffic controllers' union GdF, at the Frankfurt airport.

On Tuesday, the striking ground workers called on air traffic controllers in Frankfurt to take solidarity strike action. The airport management, Fraport, responded immediately with an appeal to the Frankfurt Labour Court, declaring that any solidarity action by air traffic controllers would be illegal.

Fraport's labour director, Herbert Mai, denounced the ground crew strikers for attempting to "ignite a wildfire" that was "completely unjustified." On the same day, the position of Fraport was bolstered by the Frankfurt court, which banned the GdF from issuing any call for solidarity action. One day later, on Wednesday, the court reconvened to ban the GdF strike altogether.

The 200 ground workers at Frankfurt had carried several days of strike action last week, campaigning for higher wages and better working conditions. In the middle the week, the union accepted an offer to discuss a new offer from Fraport. But after a few hours of negotiations, it became clear that this offer was merely a new provocation on the part of management.

According to a spokesman for the GdF, "Fraport AG was not even ready to put forward its previous offer to the GdF as the basis for negotiations." The new Fraport offer does not even mention run supervision, where some 100 workers carry out a very important, demanding and responsible job involving all aspects of airplane security on the ground.

The provocative nature of the Fraport offer was

immediately recognised by sections of the German media. "Brutal Contract War" was the headline of the article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* at the start of the week. The newspaper wrote that no one should believe the company had any serious intention of reaching an agreement with the union at the weekend. "Whoever submits an offer in the decisive round of negotiations that is worse than the previous one is only intent on escalation," it said.

The aim of this escalation is nothing less than the destruction of the air traffic controllers' union. Eighteen months ago, the Federal Labour Court issued a judgement permitting smaller unions and professional associations such as the Marburger Bund, the pilots' union Cockpit, the train drivers' union GdL, and the air traffic controllers' union GdF the right to function and granted them a greater radius of action.

Since then, the bigger unions affiliated to the German Federation of Unions (DGB) have been collaborating closely with the employers' associations to overturn this decision in order to increase the powers of the DGB to police workers. Instead of lengthy legal proceedings whose outcome is uncertain, the plan is to quickly smash the small craft unions.

A key role in the attempt to bring the GdF to its knees is being played by Herbert Mai. For decades, he was a leading member of the trade union OTV (Union of Public Services, Transport and Traffic—a forerunner of today's Verdi) and its chairman from 1995 to 2000. He then changed sides to join the board of Fraport, where he is paid a six-figure salary as a so-called labour director while at the same time maintaining his links to Verdi.

and a fight for higher salaries and better working conditions for all airport workers.

Fraport has prepared intensively for the strike under his leadership. Technicians and other employees, mostly from middle management, have been trained to carry out ground crew functions in crash courses and are now being used as strikebreakers.

Barely a day passes without a new salvo from Mai and Verdi functionaries directed at the strikers. Verdi secretary Gerold Schaub accused the GdF of jeopardising working relations. A small minority of 200 people were trying to “enrich at the expense of others,” he declared.

The company’s works council chairman, Edgar Stejskal, denounced the strikers on television, accusing them of lack of solidarity with other Fraport employees and advancing unrealistic and excessive wage demands at the expense of the majority of workers.

In a leaflet, the council called upon the company board “not to yield to the exaggerated claims of the GdF.” Verdi even threatened to take strike action if the board gave in to the demands of the ground crew strikers.

In other words, Verdi threatened to strike to prevent wage increases!

Three years ago, Verdi negotiated an agreement with Fraport that led to the deterioration of incomes and working conditions for staff amounting to €24 million. Verdi is desperately seeking to prevent ground crew and their relatively small union from winning higher wages and improved working conditions because this would undermine its own policy of enforcing low-wage contracts.

Fraport pays handsomely for the Verdi strikebreakers. According to the company’s annual report in 2010, Verdi Supervisory Board members received a total of €129,250. This is on top of their remuneration from the union.

Verdi members and all employees at the Frankfurt airport must oppose the strikebreaking of Verdi and support the ground crew workers. Support for the strike must be made the starting point for a break with Verdi



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact