

German trade union Verdi seeks quick end of public sector strikes

Our correspondent
2 April 2014

The widespread participation in warning strikes last week confirms the anger of public sector workers over the conditions they confront. For years jobs have been cut and wages have stagnated or fallen in real terms.

At the same time, the Verdi union is seeking a quick agreement with the employers at the federal and municipal levels in order to avoid unlimited strikes that could trigger wider social opposition.

Last Thursday, the second day of a 48-hour warning strike in North Rhine-Westphalia, more than 60,000 workers in the public service stopped work. According to figures from Verdi, from a total of 2.1 million public sector workers, over 100,000 took part in strikes throughout the country. In the ongoing negotiations Verdi is asking for a temporary wage increase of €100 per month, and a general wage rise of 3.5 percent.

Numerous municipal institutions were closed in North Rhine-Westphalia, and public transport in many areas did not run. In Duisburg, almost all public servants walked off the job.

The largest turnout took place in Dortmund, where more than 23,000 striking workers took part in a demonstration and rally. In Duisburg, 12,000 workers gathered in front of city hall, and there were also rallies with several thousand strikers in Bielefeld and Cologne.

Verdi has previously called warning strikes in many cities across the country. Workers are well aware that Verdi has accepted de facto pay cuts in recent years and many believe its current wage demands are ridiculously low.

Pascal, who took part in the strike in Dortmund, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The trade union is not interested in ordinary members very much.” If a decent agreement was not reached this time, he declared, “Then I am finished with Verdi.”

On Thursday, Verdi called warning strikes at seven airports—Munich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Cologne-Bonn, Düsseldorf, Hannover and Hamburg. But there was hardly any sign of the strike at most of the airports. In Frankfurt, Verdi organised more widespread action ahead of the elections for the works council at airport operator Fraport.

At 3 a.m., workers in baggage and plane preparation, workshops and administration went on strike. Passenger security workers had also originally been called out, but FraSec, a Fraport subsidiary responsible for checking passengers’ baggage, reached an agreement for security personnel in Hesse, Rhineland Palatinate and Saarland on Wednesday.

At gate 75 of Rhein-Main airport, where striking workers gathered, some were angry with Verdi’s tactics. “This warning strike is a joke,” said a driver who had worked there for 10 years. “I hope there will be a proper strike sometime,” another added. “If everyone doesn’t strike together, then the action isn’t worth it,” he said. Prior to the strike, Verdi had ensured that enough personnel stayed on the job in every department, he reported.

Speaking to workers, Christine Behle, lead negotiator from Verdi’s national executive who is running for reelection, demagogically declared, “There is enough money there,” adding, “for 20 years you have been asked to give back.” Behle, who is also vice chair on Lufthansa’s management board, conveniently said nothing about Verdi’s role in imposing these concessions.

When WSWs reporters said to the striking workers, “These people don’t represent you—they represent Fraport and Lufthansa,” they were met with general agreement.

Most baggage workers carry out heavy labour in all

types of weather. They are worlds apart from the highly paid trade union functionaries. For a long time, many of the airport workers have not been employed by Fraport but by outside firms, which pay poorly. Strikers told the WSWS they didn't expect any improvement in working conditions from a warning strike.

"A wage increase is urgently required," said Melin, a baggage worker. "One can't live in the Rhein-Main area with the money we earn here. I have two children and I actually have to top up my earnings (by claiming state support) to pay rent of almost €900."

Melin has worked at the airport for seven years. "Before that I was unemployed," he said. "I was almost in a better financial position than as now. Constantly loading baggage is hard work, and we also don't have enough staff. I get nothing out of it. I can't put any money aside in any case. We would definitely be happy if we are able to make ends meet as a result of the strike."

The work was very tough, Bakis confirmed. His colleague had been a baggage worker for four years—first loading and then as a freight driver after injuring his arm from non-stop heavy loading. "The money we earn is not worth all the effort," he commented.

Ten years ago, Fraport founded its own personnel firm, APS (Airport Personal Service GmbH), which cooperates with the state job agency. Whoever starts work at Fraport AG today is usually hired through APS. The company then passes tasks on to other contractors.

At the time when the activity of outside firms at Frankfurt airport was massively expanded in order to lower labour costs, Herbert Mai was head of human resources at Fraport. Mai was previously chairman of the public service transport union (ÖTV), the predecessor of Verdi, before switching to management in 2001 where he held the post of Fraport labour director until 2012. Frank Bsirske followed him as trade union chairman

Edgar Stejskal, chairman of the company's works council and long-term Verdi leader, also tried to defend the union in front of striking workers. "The transition to outside firms was dictated to us by the EU," he said. The European Union had "forced" the airlines "to allow outside firms to operate ground transport," he added, while remaining silent on how Verdi cooperated

in the outsourcing of jobs. Two years ago Stejskal viciously attacked the strike by air traffic controllers.

After he left, a striking worker asked, "Do you remember what (the former chairman of the Fraport board Wilhelm) Bender promised us at the time on the discussion on the airport expansion and the new railway? 'There will be an economic upturn and 40,000 new jobs at Frankfurt airport', that is literally what they promised us. And what has come out of that? Who does the grinding work and who is cashing in? I wouldn't like to know what those functionaries at the top earn. Certainly many times more than us."

Fearing a rebellion by rank-and-file workers, Verdi bureaucrats are anxious to shut down the struggle as soon as possible. In an interview with radio station *Deutschlandfunk* last Thursday, Verdi chairman Frank Bsirske made it clear he was chiefly concerned with preventing larger walkouts. Answering the moderator's question as to why the union had not waited until the third round of talks before calling warning strikes, Bsirske said, "Better to have warning strikes now as a clear signal to the employer so that they can get an idea of the strength of feeling" of workers. That was better "than there being a workers' struggle in three or four weeks on a totally different scale," he commented.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact