

Lorry drivers protest across Europe against low wages

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Several hundred lorry drivers demonstrated in Berlin on the first Saturday in May against low wages in Europe. The demonstration was part of protests in a number of European cities, including Oslo, The Hague, Copenhagen and Madrid. The initiative was organised by various professional bodies, including the German Lorry Drivers Club. At the rally in Berlin, there was no sign of the Verdi trade union or any other unions affiliated to the German trade union confederation (DGB).

More than a million lorry drivers are on the road in Germany every day. Most of them have to cope with extreme time pressure, low wages and ruthless competition resulting from the European Union's (EU's) liberalisation policy, which has been intensified significantly with the EU's eastward expansion 10 years ago.

Hundreds of millions of tons of goods are transported on the mostly overcrowded roads every day. This includes supply materials for the auto industry, which have to be delivered "just in time," basic materials for industry, coal, oil, liquefied gas, concrete, steel and building materials, and foodstuffs, as well as goods ordered online every day.

The working conditions for the majority of lorry drivers are brutal. Predetermined times for particular distances can often not be maintained due to traffic jams. Legal driving periods are forcibly breached as a result, and drivers have to pay corresponding fines.

The tiredness of drivers that results from this regularly leads to tragic and catastrophic accidents. Having worked hard for decades, as they get older, lorry drivers face the loss of their jobs and low wages and pensions, and have increasing health problems.

Resistance to wage dumping in the driving transport industry has been developing for years with protests

and demonstrations increasingly organised independently of the unions. Also present at the rally in Berlin were members of the initiative "Actie in de Transport" (Action in transport), which was founded in the Netherlands. The aim of the organisation is to bring together drivers and small haulage entrepreneurs of European countries to improve the situation in the industry.

There are now supporters of the group in the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Germany. According to its own sources, 25,000 people support the group on Facebook and exchange ideas about problems and demands.

In the goals of the group, it states, "It should not and will not be confined to Facebook. We would very much like to influence politics, in order that the enormous east-west price differential, which emerged as a result of market liberalisation, can be harmonised. We are not opposing foreign colleagues, or against the haulage companies. On the contrary, we demand the same conditions and prerequisites so that we can survive. Only with the same conditions is it possible to have fair competition. This is our aim!"

On the Facebook page, some of the events that led to the founding of Actie in de Transport are mentioned. At the beginning of last year, it became public in the Netherlands that a Latvian haulage firm, with its base in Lübeck, Germany, was hiring drivers from the Philippines. They were to drive throughout Europe for €680 per month plus expenses. In the Netherlands, there are tens of thousands of unemployed drivers who are priced out of a job due to EU regulations.

Cases of drivers working for the minimum wage of €380 per month have been reported in Italy. Some Hungarian drivers earn 10 cents per

kilometre—starvation. Since virtually nothing can be saved on diesel, tariffs, freight costs and other operating costs, the race to the bottom between haulage firms takes place almost entirely in the area of wages and working conditions, and in cuts to personnel.

The problems identified are backed up by the publication of statistics from associations. An article in *Trans aktuell*, under the headline “Market liberalisation: cost pressures increase”, notes: “It is the tenth anniversary of the EU’s major eastward expansion. It has produced a conflicting balance. There are a lot of complaints about cost competition and wage dumping. But often German companies are behind the competitors from the new candidate states.”

As a poll of drivers from the federal office for goods transportation showed, 72 percent of cabotage drivers work on contracts from German companies. Cabotage means the assumption by a foreign company of transport services within the country.

Some of the participants at the protest in Berlin had travelled far. Some lorry drivers protested for better working conditions with banners on their vehicles. Slogans on some of the banners included: “Poor despite work”, “From a dream job to a nightmare” and “We want to live from our work and not from Hartz IV”—a reference to the Hartz IV social welfare scheme. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to demonstrators. Andreas, 37, comes from Lower Austria and has two children. He stated, “Wages and working conditions cannot be defended on the national level. There must be a struggle on the European level. The workers have to fight jointly. The firms are pushing down wages by playing off workers from different countries against each other.”

Sven, 37, lives in Bavaria and has a son. He said, “The trade unions are not pulling in the same direction as us. The vehicle drivers union [KFG] uses the dues from the members to drive around in expensive rented cars. Verdi only talks and does nothing. Over the past five years, wages in Germany have fallen in comparison to Austria by between €600 and €700. Workers are forced, out and then new ones hired on much lower wages.”

Andreas added, “And the low German wages are then used to break the wage contract in Austria. We have to fight together now, otherwise it will be too late.”

The *Berliner Zeitung* quoted Klaus-Jürgen, 57, from

Kleinmachnow. He reported that he had been recently laid off because he had refused to ignore legal provisions on periods of work and rest. He had worked in the job since 2000. Some of the demands on the drivers were no longer manageable: “I was to drive between Berlin and Antwerp three times per week. That simply cannot be done,” he said.

Aktie in de Transport’s demands to improve the position of lorry drivers in Europe are directed above all at the EU and national governments. For example, a unified minimum wage and equal freight tariffs are demanded within the EU. Apart from letters and petitions, which are also directed to the EU commission and bourgeois politicians, demonstrations and protests are to draw attention to the difficult conditions facing lorry drivers and appeal for support from the population.

While it is to be welcomed that lorry drivers are demonstrating and protesting independently of the trade unions, which have not lifted a finger for them, a warning must be made about any illusions in the EU or national governments. It is precisely they who are to blame for market liberalisation, social attacks and wage cutting.

The trade unions defend their national companies and governments in these attacks against the drivers, in order to protect their own competitiveness and pit them against each other.

A genuine struggle against wage cuts and social attacks in Europe is only possible on the basis of an international, socialist perspective in the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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