

# German postal service threatens to lay off strikers while deploying strike-breakers

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20 May 2015

In spite of major attacks and threats on striking postal workers in Germany, the Verdi trade union is continuing to limit the strike to regional centres, even though this means that just several thousand of the 140,000 employees have been called out on strike.

This stalling tactic is aimed at dissipating the combativity of the workforce and selling out the strike. The tactic of the union is playing directly into the hands of management. The company is utilising the limited strike to intensify their attacks on the strikers. Since the postal service continues to have a significant number of civil servants at its disposal who are not permitted to strike, they are being deployed as strike-breakers.

This not only violates Germany's constitution, which bans the use of civil servants as strike-breakers, but also a ruling of the German Constitutional Court from 1993, which determined that the federal postal service at that time could not order civil servants to fill positions left vacant by strike action.

A spokesman for the postal service explained at the beginning of the week that the strike was not tangibly restricting the delivery of letters or parcels. The trade unions protested against the use of civil servants as strike-breakers, but refused to significantly expand the strike.

On May 13, Verdi called for strikes in 83 letter-sorting centres, as well as in transportation and in departments for major clients. The main demand of the strike is a reduction in working hours from 38.5 hours per week to 36 hours on full pay. This is because the postal service did not maintain its contractually agreed commitment to restrict the handing of delivery zones to private companies, a commitment obtained by accepting a longer workweek.

As previously reported by the WSW, the postal service is doing everything it can to reduce the costs of

postal delivery. This has been justified with reference to the low-wage contracts agreed by the service's competitors in private firms. In reality, they are trying to keep their promise to the financial elite to increase dividends by 2020 and expand business operations into foreign markets.

The private competitors normally work with subcontractors paying far less than the standard agreement at the German postal service. In the newly established 49 distribution centres of Delivery GmbH, 20,000 jobs are to be created in the coming five years, but they will be paid according to rates prevailing in the freight and logistics branch, where wages are around 20 percent lower than the postal service's pay agreement.

Temporary workers who are still paid the higher level are being threatened with the prospect of not being offered new contracts if they refuse to accept the shift to the Delivery GmbH pay agreement based on the freight and logistics branch.

In several letter centres, superiors have placed considerable pressure on striking employees in one-to-one meetings, threatening them with the loss of their job or termination of contract if they take part in the postal strike. Some employees were told that participation in the strike would have consequences. "They have also indicated that they are looking at the contracts of temporary workers," a worker in Hesse reported.

Instead of expanding the strike, Verdi sent a letter of complaint to Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel, Social Democratic Party (SPD), appealing for him to apply pressure on the postal service management. Verdi celebrated as a success Gabriel's meeting with the chairman of the board, calling for the "respecting of personal as well as collective employee rights."

But the government is firmly on the side of company

management. The federal state owns around 21 percent of Deutsche Post AG shares, and as a result is directly involved in the drive for larger profits for shareholders. It therefore has a considerable interest in reducing employee costs, since the percentage of wages paid to postal workers equates to around 50 percent.

As was to be expected, postal service chief Frank Appel firmly rejected the accusation that pressure was being applied to employees, but could not deny the fact that concrete threats to delivery workers had been made.

In previous weeks a total of some 7,000 workers in several letter centres, in transportation and in the division for corporate clients, were involved in the strike, but Verdi announced May 18 that only 5,000 members were being called out.

Verdi is doing everything to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion by agreeing a rotten compromise.

Further talks are due today and Thursday on a wage increase for the 140,000 employees. This pay agreement expires at the end of May. Verdi is calling for a pay rise of 5.5 percent over 12 months. A Verdi spokesman in Berlin sought to calm the membership by referring to these talks. Should these fail, the strike could be expanded at the beginning of June, he said. However, this does nothing to assist the 20,000 workers to be employed by the newly established Delivery GmbH, who will see their wages drop by some 20 percent.



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