Germany: Bus drivers in Hesse continue their strike

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The strike by bus drivers in the German state of Hesse, which began last week, has continued this week. More than 2,000 bus drivers in Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Gießen, Marburg, Offenbach, Hanau, Maintal, Fulda and other municipalities are conducting a struggle against the intolerable conditions in their workplace.

The strike is part of a worldwide wave of labour struggles. In every country the attacks mounted by the ruling elites have reached fever pitch and open class conflicts are breaking out. In the last few weeks and months, workers in bus and transport companies and the public sector have commenced major strikes in France, Italy and the US. In Britain, rail transport workers are also taking action.

In Hesse, workers from a number of private bus companies are on strike. The private companies are organized in the state association of Hessian bus companies (LHO). A tariff agreement between the bus drivers union, Verdi, and the LHO expired in April 2016. Since then, the LHO has refused to raise the gross hourly wage from €12 (US$12.85) to a miserly €12.65 ($13.55) per hour. Verdi is officially calling for a graduated increase in the gross salary wage to €13.50 ($14.45), improved regulations for breaks and an extra day's holiday.

Seven months later, the union finally called for a strike on Monday, January 9, apparently anticipating a two-day strike. On the first day, Verdi's area manager Ronald Laubrock told the press: "We do not want to fire all our bullets in the first week."

Since then Verdi was forced to extend the strike day by day, until on Friday bus traffic in large parts of the region came to a complete standstill. Solidarity also came from drivers not directly affected in the dispute, such as tram drivers in Darmstadt and bus drivers in Hanau and Gießen. Verdi has blocked any wider mobilization of workers in other areas of public transport.

The strike has now achieved at least one objective: It has revealed the intolerable conditions prevailing in Hessian public transport and made them known to a broad public. These are the same conditions that apply among broad layers of the working class, working for bus companies, road cleaning, parcel post, train, airport and children's day care centres—all indispensable parts of the public infrastructure, which Verdi is desperate to maintain isolated.

The striking bus drivers spoke openly about their working conditions with the *World Socialist Web Site*. "With all respect, what we receive as salary is far too little," said Rasko, a bus driver in Frankfurt for the past 15 years. "In those 15 years, my basic wage has risen by just two euros. I started with 9.97 euros per hour and now receive 12 euros."

One of his colleagues insists that the public learn what their real wages are: "What the media is writing is simply not true: i.e., that we receive an hourly wage of 12 euros. We are being denied breaks, although we cannot even use them often! This has been the case since 2002." According to his calculations, his hourly wage is no more than 10.67 euros gross. "This means that we have been robbed of several hundred euros," a young colleague confirmed. "With what we get, we are practically on the level of Hartz IV social welfare payments."

Their responsibility is very high, the bus drivers stress. One said, "We are responsible on our own for a fully loaded articulated [jointed] bus. Often we have to transport the old, the sick or school children. You have to have your eyes everywhere." If there is any damage the driver alone has to answer for everything. "The company does not protect us."

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Another driver reports that he worries constantly because he does not know how to pay his rent and provide for his family. “My work suffers as a result and the passengers notice it too.” “Modern slavery,” his colleague said, “a shame for a world metropolis like Frankfurt, one of the richest cities in Germany and Europe.”

Mustapha said that nearly all of his colleagues depend on social support, despite full-time work, receiving either child benefit or housing allowance, or a top-up from the job centre to the level of Hartz IV payments. “It’s just degrading,” he says. Previously, the bus drivers were municipal employees in a secure job, but a wave of privatization swept away all of their benefits: “This was accompanied by wage dumping. Colleagues who drive streetcars and subways earn almost double as much as us. They will also receive holiday allowances, company pensions, bonuses, job tickets and other municipal benefits. We do not receive any such thing.”

How did this come about?

Verdi, as well as politicians from the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party, all try to shift the blame for this state of affairs onto the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Seventeen years ago the state government headed by Roland Koch (CDU) in Hesse introduced the practice of allowing contract bids Europe-wide. As a result, dozens of private companies have split the transport market among themselves. “It’s just about profit,” as one bus driver said.

However, all of the parties in the state have supported this course for many years. In addition to the CDU, the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party also pursued a policy oriented exclusively to profit. Some politicians are today calling for the so-called “re-municipalization” of the privatized enterprises and wants to concentrate them into a single municipal holding, but this does not change the conditions for the workers in the least.

Public transport in Hesse was exclusively in municipal hands 20 years ago until being fully reorganised in 1995. Today, the LHO shares the local transport market with numerous partially and fully privatized companies. In addition to the ICB, MMF, Alpina, Regiobus or DB bus services, companies belonging to the French Transdev Group and the Italian Netinera Group are also active. Behind the image of modern public transport as portrayed in glossy brochures is a massive worsening of wages and working conditions.

The European Commission has succeeded in liberalizing local public transport, giving competitors the opportunity to participate in public transport bidding throughout the continent. The contracting authorities used the competitive pressure to implement low-wage tariffs in every sphere—and every new contract was signed by the public service union Verdi. Together they smashed up the Federal Employment Agreement for Public Transport and divided nationwide around 250,000 transport workers by state and region. Layoffs, wage cuts, reduction of leave entitlement and further social cuts were the result.

In Hesse there has been a cordial agreement between the ministry, private contractors and German trade unions, since the CDU-Green government’s presidency under Volker Bouffier (CDU) and Tarik Al-Wazir (Greens) took power. Al-Wazir, the then DGB district chairman Stefan Körzell and Hessian trade union leaders—including Verdi—all took part in a roundtable at the Economics Ministry. They said at the time their aim was to solve all issues of future labour market and economic policy. They decided to establish a so-called “hot line between the ministry and trade unions.”

Al-Wazir, who is also Hessian minister of transport, told the *Frankfurt Rundschau* that “almost all bus drivers were paid according to contract” and that all contracts had been “negotiated on the trade union side by Verdi.” Although LHO has so far been stubborn and has not yielded an inch, Al-Wazir, on Friday, urged that a resolution be taken as soon as possible to end the strike.

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