

Striking bus drivers in Hesse, Germany: “The latest company offer is a joke”

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20 January 2017

Some 2,500 bus drivers in the German state of Hesse have been on strike against highly exploitative conditions for the past 10 days. On Tuesday evening, the state association of bus companies (LHO) presented an offer that can only be interpreted as an insult.

On Wednesday, however, the bus drivers union, Verdi, decided to resume negotiations with the companies the following morning. Meanwhile the strike continues, “to keep pressure up during the negotiations,” as Verdi’s press office declared. It is obviously impossible for Verdi at this point to break the strike and send the drivers back to work.

The new offer was “just an insult”—this was the unanimous opinion of strikers on Wednesday. The LHO had originally proposed raising the basic wage from €12 (US\$ 12.79) per hour to €12.65 in a series of steps. On Tuesday, LHO managing director Volker Tuchan offered an additional 35 cents, on condition that the final hourly wage of €13 come into effect only on January 1, 2019. The old contract expired seven months ago.

“This is no improvement at all. We haven’t been out in the cold for 10 days for this,” one bus driver in Frankfurt told WSWs reporters. “We can’t live on the wage they pay us. That has to change.” Bus workers in Giessen remain 100 percent behind the strike. “We will continue until we receive a reasonable offer,” one bus driver told the local newspaper.

The workers, who walked out against 20 private bus companies in Hesse, have received the support of other bus and tram drivers in the form of solidarity strikes. In Darmstadt, where drivers have been striking for eight days, an attempt by HEAG mobilo, a regional transport company, to organise strikebreaking on streetcar routes collapsed.

When one of the trams attempted to leave the depot in

the southern part of Darmstadt, some 30 workers blocked it by occupying the tracks. They stayed there, even after the manager called the police. Shortly thereafter, the company abandoned its attempt to break the strike.

“This sharp escalation is surprising,” commented a spokesman for another regional company, traffiQ, in Frankfurt. Solidarity strikes also took place in Giessen, Hanau and Offenbach. Thousands of workers are willing to support the bus drivers and at the same time stand up against their own conditions.

“It is pure wage slavery,” said Paolo, an Italian-born bus driver, at the Römerhof depot in Frankfurt. “In the last few days, we have talked a lot about wages and our responsibilities. Everything has changed enormously since 1995.” A co-worker added: “The city sanitation drivers get more money. Is that logical? They drive garbage, we drive people. We’re expected to be satisfied with a real starvation wage.”

Cansun Otto drives a bus for DB Busverkehr, which operates several lines in Frankfurt. “I’ve been a bus driver body and soul for 39 years,” Cansun said, “but the conditions have gotten worse and worse over the past 10 years.”

The drivers’ schedules involve large amounts of overtime, and the 39.5-hour working week on paper actually works out to 44 hours. “A huge problem is the so-called split shifts,” explains Cansun. “For example, I have to drive from 5:00 a.m. until 10:30 a.m., then I have several hours of a break, then another three hours driving. My commute takes an hour—so I’m out of the house for 15 hours, but I only get paid for nine.” He often works for 10 days straight. “Last summer, the high season, these conditions were imposed on us.”

Cansun used to drive bus tours all over the world, “with and without trailers, even in double-decker buses.

Actually, I should receive 16 euros an hour at this point, but that doesn't matter." He stands 100 percent behind the strike and calls the company offer a joke.

Readers' letters in the local daily newspapers demonstrate the extent of support for the bus drivers. A typical example, from RL in Giessen, reads: "It is not the bus drivers or trade unionists whom one should 'criticise.' They are only utilising a democratic basic right. It is the local company SWG and the city of Giessen that should be 'criticised.' This situation has arisen through a corporate plan based on outsourcing and temporary work. ... Another personal note. I am severely handicapped and am inevitably dependent on the city's public transport, since I can not afford a taxi or Minicar."

An article in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), which called on the bus drivers to stop their strike with the headline "Do not exploit the sympathy you have," provoked a series of protest letters. The article was "peculiar," wrote one reader. "It is admitted that bus drivers should receive a 'decent' salary, but are now being asked to surrender in order not to lose public sympathy. What nonsense? The bus drivers should strike until they receive a wage that guarantees them and their families a normal life."

Another reader commented sarcastically: "Yes, yes, the world is so simple! Enough of strikes. ... I have seldom had more questions about an FR article! We should be glad that there are organized workers who are ready to fight for better working conditions! The headline of the article should be 'Solidarity with the striking bus drivers—keep it up!'"

While large sections of the population in Hesse support the strike and connect it to their own problems, Verdi is conducting the most limited kind of action, mobilizing only the bus drivers immediately affected and refusing to extend it to other sections of workers.



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