

Support the striking bus drivers in Hesse, Germany!

The Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) welcomes and supports the strike of Hesse bus drivers, who have been fighting against low wages and miserable working conditions for two weeks.

The Verdi trade union originally called for a two-day protest. In this way, it intended to allow workers to let off steam and then conclude a contract agreement with the Hesse state association of bus operators (LHO). But they did not anticipate the readiness to fight among the bus drivers, who refused to go back to work. Verdi was compelled to lengthen the strike day by day.

Under the collective agreement a Hesse bus driver currently earns a wage of €12 (US\$12.85) gross per hour. In reality, it is much less, because sums are deducted for break times, even though breaks are often skipped. For this, a driver must accept irregular working hours, while daily transporting thousands of people, including the elderly and vulnerable young and school children, through hectic and chaotic traffic. If something happens, he is solely responsible.

Verdi demanded an increase in pay to €13.50 per hour, which would still be very low. The LHO is only offering €13—and only from January 2019.

The strike of Hesse bus drivers is so significant because millions of workers throughout Germany, Europe and the entire world suffer under similar conditions. After decades of budget cuts, privatisations and wage and social welfare cuts, socially necessary, responsible and stressful jobs are paid so poorly that workers cannot live on the wages. Wages hardly cover the cost of rapidly rising rents and the necessities of life, let alone the costs of feeding a family, raising children, education and holidays.

This not only applies to public transport, but also for the health care and education sectors, as well as numerous other social professions. Even in the large plants of the auto and steel industries, temporary and contract workers labour for miserable wages alongside their permanently employed colleagues.

This is the reason why the fighting spirit of the bus drivers

has found broad solidarity and support. While the media agitate and call to “get behind the steering wheel!” (*Frankfurter Rundschau*), drivers are being overwhelmed with letters in support of the strike. In Darmstadt, tram drivers are striking in solidarity and there were other solidarity strikes in several cities.

But nobody can afford to have any illusions. Without drawing a balance sheet of the causes that have led to the miserable working conditions and developing a new strategy, the strike will not be successful.

Bus drivers not only confront the employers in the LHO and its arrogant and self-satisfied leader Volker Tuchan, who has declared their demands to be “unachievable.” A much greater problem is the Verdi trade union and the political parties closely connected with it, the Social Democrats (SPD), Left Party and Greens.

The transformation of the public sector into a low-wage sector would not have been possible without their active support. They now see their task as maintaining control over all opposition, and isolating and ultimately dissipating it.

The Green Party member Frank Bsirske, who has led Verdi for 17 years, was previously human resources chief for the city of Hannover and eliminated 1,000 of 16,000 jobs. As Verdi leader, he provided political cover for the SPD-Green coalition as it adopted the Hartz IV laws and the Agenda 2010 social welfare reforms. In the process, it created a huge low-wage sector in which 40 percent of all wage-dependent workers in Germany now labour.

At the same time, in Berlin Bsirske worked closely with the red-red (SPD-Left Party) Senate, which cut wages in the public sector by 12 percent and reduced public sector workers by a third. He has sat or sits on the supervisory boards of Lufthansa, Deutsche Bank and energy concern RWE, which have all imposed massive wage and job cuts, and earns approximately half a million euros.

Verdi does not represent the interests of its members. It is a service enterprise for the corporations. It assists the corporations to impose attacks on wages and benefits as “socially responsibly” as possible, i.e., without any social

resistance emerging against it.

This is also their role in the bus drivers' strike. Verdi lead negotiator Jochen Koppel, who also sits on the supervisory board of the Frankfurt am Main Transport Association (VGF), sees his main task as isolating the strike and shutting it down as quickly as possible.

After the LHO did not present a new offer at a meeting on Thursday and was not prepared to discuss issues of content, he announced the strike would be over on Monday and agreed to arbitration without consulting bus drivers. "Arbitration begins on Monday at the start of the shift," a press release from Verdi stated.

"There will then be an obligation to observe labour peace, strikes during arbitration are excluded."

The privatisation of public services and operations would have not been possible without the active collaboration of Verdi, the SPD, Left Party and Greens. Twenty-five years ago, public transport and health care remained largely in public hands. Workers did not have a high income, but a reasonable one and good social security. Today they have largely been privatised, serve as a source of profits for investors and are subordinated to ruthless competition fought out over the bones of the workers, passengers and patients.

At the municipal level, SPD, Left Party and Green politicians, who are mostly Verdi members, hand public transport to the company making the lowest offer, which generally also pays the lowest wages. Some of them subsequently express hypocritical solidarity with the workers who try to resist.

A leading role in the privatisation of public services is played by the "competitiveness policy" of the European Union. Verdi, the SPD, Greens and Left Party all support the European Union. They have abandoned the opposition to this representative of the interests of the major banks and corporations to right-wing parties, which lead in a dangerous, nationalist direction.

The attack on the wages and social achievements of workers is taking place globally. While the living standards of the vast majority are declining, a tiny clique is enriching itself fabulously. According to a report by Oxfam, the eight richest billionaires in the world own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population, 3.6 billion people.

The gap between rich and poor has widened above all in the United States. A government of billionaires, militarists and right-wing extremists is now taking power under Donald Trump that threatens the entire world with war.

The reason for this development is the irresolvable crisis of the capitalist system. The private ownership of the means of production, the profit principle and the nation state upon which capitalism rests cannot be made to conform to the globalised economy, which is based on a global division of

labour and distribution.

As was the case 100 years ago, the capitalists are responding to the crisis of their system with attacks on the working class, dictatorship and war. This also applies to Germany. For three years, the return of German militarism has been systematically advanced. The refugee crisis and the terrorist threat serve as pretexts for the construction of a police state. And the attacks on wages and social benefits will continue to finance the costs of trade war and militarism.

The struggle against low wages can therefore only be successful if it is linked to the fight against capitalism and war. The following conclusions must be drawn for the bus drivers' strike:

1. The strike is condemned to defeat if it remains under the control of Verdi. Build your own action committees, independent of Verdi that can lead the strike and make connections with other workers!

2. The strike must be expanded and support mobilised from workers in the public and private sector, who confront the same problems. Contact must be made with workers throughout Europe, the United States and other countries.

3. The struggle against low wages and social attacks requires a socialist strategy. Only within the framework of a policy aimed at uniting workers around the world against capitalism, regardless of their origin and nationality, can the strike develop the necessary strength and scope.

4. Workers need a new party to fight for an internationalist and socialist programme. Make contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit to discuss these questions. Participate in the building of the PSG and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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