

Verdi union strangles bus drivers' strike in Hesse, Germany

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Bus drivers in the German state of Hesse have been conducting a strike for two weeks that has gained wide support and sympathy. However, the service sector union Verdi is seeking to strangle the strike by agreeing to end the walkout and begin arbitration today.

Verdi had originally planned only a two-day protest strike, but then had to keep extending the walkout each day because of the determination of transit workers. The bus drivers had taken the strike as a signal to mount a fight against low wages and miserable working conditions. The purpose of arbitration is to end the labor dispute.

The employers have not made the slightest concession since their last offer, which was rejected by the union's bargaining commission. News reports to the contrary are false. For example, Volker Tuchan, executive director of the Hesse State Association of Omnibus Employers (LHO), claims the association had offered "up to a 13.78 euros hourly wage." This simply includes the metropolitan supplement of 78 cents for the city of Frankfurt, an allowance which not all bus drivers receive.

Asked by the *Giessen Allgemeine* newspaper, "Did you expect such a tough dispute?" Tuchan replied, "The ferocity is astonishing in so far that it hides expectations that cannot be fulfilled. They are motivating the strike, but they cannot be implemented."

Against this stubbornness, Verdi has responded by announcing it will go to arbitration. "The employers have presented neither a new offer, nor talked to us about substantive issues such as wage levels and working conditions," writes Jochen Koppel, Verdi negotiator (who also sits on the supervisory board of the Frankfurt Transport Company (VGF). "So we realized that the only path remaining was arbitration."

By going to arbitration, which runs from January 23 to February 5, the union is obliged to observe so-called "industrial peace" and halt the strike. A press release

from Verdi in Hesse reads more like a threat to the strikers: "The arbitration begins next Monday when the shift begins. From then on there is an obligation to observe industrial peace. Strikes are excluded during the period of arbitration. That means, from early Monday, the buses are on the road again."

Both Verdi and the employer can each nominate an arbitrator. The employers have chosen Volker Sparmann, the "mobility commissioner" of the Hesse state government. He was previously CEO of the Rhine-Main Transport Association (RMV) and also sits on the supervisory board of the Berlin Transport Company BVG. As of this writing, Verdi has not yet named an arbitrator.

Workers have expressed their discontent with the news about arbitration. "This looks to me like crap," a worker at Römerhof in Frankfurt said. "We haven't achieved anything, but now we have to start driving again." Workers do not expect much from arbitration. "Probably not much will come out. They're not giving us anything voluntarily, and with arbitration, they get the strike off the table—that means there's no more pressure."

Bus driver Christian spoke about the offer of a €13 basic wage, saying, "That is just 35 cents more than the LHO offer before the strike. We would only get this in two years' time. For this, we have lost approximately €1,000 in the two-week strike. The little man must bleed".

He continued, "The entire privatization of the last 20 years is an aberration. Urban transport belongs in municipal hands. It must not be profit-driven. A profit-driven public transport—this is nonsense. The competitive situation and the erosion [of conditions] involved is absolute nonsense."

The workers are angry that the Frankfurt newspapers have spread the false information propagated by Alois Rautschka, the managing director of ICB, which operates 50 percent of buses in Frankfurt. Rautschka had claimed drivers regularly gross between €2,500 and €2,700 a

month.

The workers confirm that without overtime and extra shifts, they earn just €2,000 a month. “With the pay here you can’t manage on a single income,” says Christian. “How do I get my family through things? How can I pay my rent? Rents in Frankfurt are super expensive. The metropolitan supplement is just a few crumbs, a drop in the ocean. Bus drivers used to earn good money.”

Christian explained most drivers must pay for their own licenses. “It costs €8,000 to €10,000 to pay for a bus driver’s license. In the past, it was subsidized. When I started 10 years ago I had to pay half myself.”

Bus drivers must renew their license every five years, he said. “With several driving modules, a medical examination, license fees plus a driver’s card—for this we also must pay at least €500 to €700.”

“We move people, not bricks. I carry the young, old, and disabled people, I have to take everything into consideration.”

The bus drivers discussed the fact that many colleagues have now registered with Verdi as members. “The lure was that they would receive strike pay retroactively. As a member, you have to sign up for at least one year and pay a monthly percentage of your gross salary, which is €20.”

At the DB Bus Transit depot in Frankfurt-Griesheim workers talked about what might come out of arbitration. “The LHO is extremely stubborn,” said one. “Look at what they have offered regarding rules for work breaks: They only want to pay for break times if they are less than ten minutes.”

So-called “split shifts” were their biggest problem. “These involve long breaks for which we do not get paid. It might mean that we work 22 days and only get paid for twenty and a half days.” The rules covering breaks are almost more important than the basic wage, other strikers confirmed. “We will only receive peanuts for our hourly wage increase”.

Two things are particularly significant regarding the strike. First, the strikers have won the warm support of other workers. Again and again, visitors come by, drop off cake or something else and say that they support the drivers. A vehicle from the VGF urban transport company stopped at the gate while the WSWs reporters were there and the driver lowered the window and shouted, “When can we finally strike along with you?” In a brief conversation, he and two colleagues said, “Even out of solidarity, we should long have been out there with you.”

This is exactly what many striking bus drivers are pondering. Dasos, a driver originally from Greece, said,

“There is no unity in the strike. Why aren’t all bus drivers striking, along with tram drivers, underground and train drivers too? We’re in the same situation, we all have the same problems. Why don’t we all strike together?”

The second factor is the determination of striking bus drivers to fight for significant improvements, not just “peanuts.” The drivers did not begin the strike lightly, but decided to fight because they could no longer tolerate the conditions they face.

For Verdi, however, arbitration is the means to overcome rank-and-file opposition and shut down the struggle. From the beginning the union saw the strike as a means of allowing workers to temporarily blow off steam before betraying them. From the outset, Verdi excluded any extension of the strike to other sections of workers because this could lead into a political confrontation with the Christian Democrat-Green Party coalition government in Hesse, as well as the other capitalist parties on the federal level.

By tying up the struggle in arbitration and enforcing “industrial peace,” the union is desperately trying to prevent a broader movement of public sector workers against the universal demands for austerity. Contract bargaining is currently underway for 2.2 million public sector workers employed by the states. Hesse has withdrawn from the state employers’ association, but contract negotiations for its approximately 45,000 state employees begins on January 27. On February 14, negotiations on the working conditions at VGF will begin.

Workers everywhere are angry and dissatisfied with their conditions. This has placed them on a collision course with Verdi, which is systematically isolating and strangling their struggles.



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