

Germany: What does arbitration mean for the Hesse bus drivers strike?

Marianne Arens
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Bus drivers in the German state of Hesse have been on strike for two weeks. Arbitration started on Monday.

The bus drivers in Hesse carried out their strike with great determination because they viewed it as a principled struggle against intolerable living conditions. They have opened the eyes of the public to the conditions prevailing for bus drivers in Hesse and across the country: hourly wages netting €12 or less, highly responsible work during effective service times of up to fourteen hours without payment for long waiting times between drives, no benefits, barely any prospects for promotion, etc. These are all conditions that make it impossible to lead a normal life.

On the third day, Verdi was forced to call solidarity strikes by street car and bus drivers in Darmstadt, Gießen, and Hanau, who are also engaged in wage negotiations. The negotiations over the local transport (TV-N) wage contract with the local transport employers association also remain unresolved. These workers find themselves in a similar situation to the bus drivers and are also ready for a struggle.

The situation at daycare centers, nursing homes and hospitals and among waste disposal and airport workers is similar. There are intolerable working conditions everywhere.

One nurse recently wrote an open letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel in which she stated “Patients have become economic factors, are case numbers and cost factors. They are not people anymore... It [is] no longer possible to carry out humane work... Due to inadequate finances and personnel, work time laws are not observed.” The letter has been shared widely and rapidly on social media, since thousands of employees in public service work under similar conditions and think the time is ripe for a fundamental change.

The union leadership, however, sees the situation

very differently.

From the very beginning, the service union Verdi raised very modest demands for the bus drivers strike: an increase of the hourly wage to €13.50, a shortening—but not elimination—of unpaid waiting times between drives, as well as one more day vacation. It took care not to affront its negotiation partner, the Hessian State Bus Companies Association (LHO) and threaten its competitiveness.

As the 2014 local transport wage contract states in the very first sentence of its preamble: “This wage contract serves to produce and maintain the competitiveness of the public local transport corporations.”

The LHO rejected even Verdi’s modest demands, however. LHO CEO Volker Tuchan arrogantly told the *Gießener Allgemeine Zeitung* that they “cannot be fulfilled” and are “not implementable.”

Tuchan, who is a lawyer, would be incapable of driving a crowded articulated bus through a downtown area, to say nothing of doing this for a net wage of €13. But he announces—in words reverently repeated by the media—that an improvement in the positions of the bus drivers is simply objectively impossible.

For seven months, since April 2016, Verdi has been in negotiations and has tolerated the absence of any wage contract. At the beginning of January, the union called for a two-day strike—not in order to carry out a serious workers struggle, but to serve as an outlet for the pent up anger of the bus drivers, so that they could “let off steam.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the main problems confronting the bus drivers are “the Verdi union and the parties with which it is closely connected—the SPD [Social Democratic Party], the Left Party and the Greens. The transformation of public service into a low wage sector would not have been

possible without their active support. And now they see it as their task to intercept, isolate and strangle all opposition to this. ... The strike is doomed to defeat if it remains under the control of Verdi.”

This analysis was confirmed on Monday. After a three-week strike in which the workers struggle found broad support, Verdi hastily smothered the strike and initiated arbitration. As Verdi chief negotiator Jochen Koppel (also a member of the supervisory board of the Frankfurt Transport Company VGF) wrote: “In this way it became clear that arbitration was the only way left.”

Above all, arbitration serves the purpose of ending the workers’ struggle and preventing it from spreading. According to German labour law, the imposition of arbitration forbids workers from any further strikes. The Verdi announcement threateningly stated: “Strikes are excluded for the duration of the arbitration.”

Neither of the arbitration partners has experienced anything even remotely similar to the strenuous daily work of bus driving. On the contrary, they both belong to a layer of career politicians, union and association functionaries, who have for years planned and carried out the reorganization, deregulation and privatization of public service. They share responsibility for its transformation into a gigantic low-wage sector that serves the investment and profit interests of finance capital.

The arbitrator on the side of the union is 62-year-old Rudolf Hausmann (Social Democratic Party) from Baden-Württemberg. His career as a certified teacher lasted ten years. Thirty years ago, he was a functionary of the Public Services, Transport and Haulage Union, leader of the SPD, community and state parliamentary representative, and most recently a traffic expert for Verdi in Baden-Württemberg.

The second arbitrator, appointed by the LHO, is Volker Sparmann, the founder and long-time CEO of the Rhine-Main Transport Association (RMV). Today, as transport commissioner of the Hessian state government, Sparmann is a close collaborator of the Green Party transport minister Tarek Al-Wazir. He also sits on the board of supervisors of the Berlin Transport Company (BVG).

The earliest date on which arbitration could be concluded is February 5. However, the bus drivers can expect nothing positive. The most probable outcome is

a foul compromise based on the last LHO offer, which prescribed a €13 hourly wage starting first in 2019. The arbitrators will undoubtedly propose a similar deal, well aware that any real real increase in wages would embolden other sections of workers in their struggles.

An advertising brochure of the Frankfurt Local Transport Society traffiQ describes how the bus system has been transformed since the end of the 1990s. It says that it was decided in 2001 that the state-owned VGF would be opened up to bids and split into “five bundles compatible to the needs of ‘small businesses’”. The transformation was smooth. Since 2004, year after year ... one bundle after another has been privatised. In spite of demanding quality standards, there was an approximately 25 percent decrease in costs below the already reduced market price. A success all down the line, so to speak.”

A “success” for which the bus drivers are still paying with their health and the quality of life of their families to this day.



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