

Verdi union shuts down Berlin airport workers strike

Gustav Kemper, Marianne Arens
17 March 2017

On Wednesday, the Verdi union stopped the strike by ground staff at the Tegel and Schönefeld airports in Berlin, despite the fact that the employer side refused to submit a new offer. On Tuesday afternoon the strike leadership announced to surprised workers at the Schönefeld airport that the strike was to be shut down until the weekend. Shortly before the union announcement, workers had participated in a demonstration through the airport.

As justification for shutting down the strike, Enrico Rümker, the strike leader at Schönefeld airport, stated that the union had been summoned to arbitration. In fact, no formal agreement has been struck on arbitration. Nevertheless, the union committee declared it wanted to consult from Wednesday on how to proceed.

Just days after starting their strike, ground services workers, who had begun their industrial action with great determination, have been confronted with a sabotage by their own trade union. At the beginning of March, workers voted for an indefinite strike by almost 99 percent to oppose the prevailing intolerable working conditions and low wages resulting from the privatization of airport ground services by the Social Democratic Party-Left Party Senate, led by former mayor Klaus Wowereit (SPD).

Verdi was forced to organize a strike, but limited it to single days. A 24-hour strike last Friday was to be followed by a second 24-hour strike on Monday, which under pressure from the strikers was then extended for a further day.

At the same time, Verdi prevented a strike at Stuttgart Airport, thereby isolating the Berlin workers. The Verdi press release on Monday boasted that after the fifth round of negotiations, “another strike had been averted at the last minute.”

The workers in Stuttgart are to receive a €1 per hour wage increase, the same amount that workers are demanding in Berlin. The Stuttgart deal, however, is linked to a three-year contract. The agreement is aimed at awarding workers a paltry increase, which, at the same time, prevents them, according to German labour law, from taking any further industrial action for at least three years.

Verdi had already agreed a similar deal just days before in the cities of Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Cologne. These local contracts were also struck on the basis of a three-year running time. Verdi negotiator Enrico Rümker told the WSWs that with such good deals (!) one could not “explain to anyone why there should be a strike”

He failed to mention that the situation for airport workers in Hamburg is especially tense. Lufthansa Airlines announced this week that it plans to axe hundreds of jobs in the city at its subsidiary Lufthansa Technik, including compulsory redundancies for the first time. This one example shows that the same problems prevail for airport workers across Europe—in Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, London, Paris and other cities.

Negotiations between the union and employers began in Frankfurt am Main on March 15 and it is already clear that Verdi is determined to prevent a drawn-out strike by ground crew at all German airports.

The workers reacted very differently: They demonstrated their willingness to fight at the two Berlin airports for two days. The strike was supported by nearly 100 percent of ground crew and had an effect on schedules, with many flights cancelled.

The reason for their determination rests with the miserable working conditions that have worsened over the past 10 years. The private low-cost companies pay

their ground crew workers between €9 and €11 per hour. Most employees receive short-term contracts, and many of the most difficult jobs involved in handling flights are carried out by temporary workers who often earn even less. At the same time, the workload of these workers has massively increased due to the extremely high passenger numbers in Berlin.

Nevertheless these companies have rejected the union's demand for a paltry €1 more per hour and instead offered a three-year contract with a pay increase of 8 percent, an annual hourly wage increase of just 27 cents, according to Verdi.

Twenty years ago airport ground services were owned by the state of Berlin and Lufthansa. After the SPD-Left Party Senate led by Wowereit and Gregor Gysi took power at the end of 2001, the decision was made to privatize airport services. The result is that there are now five companies that negotiate with Verdi on the employers' side, which in turn represent 17 other private companies through subsidiaries and sub-subsidiaries.

The SPD-Left Party Senate's initiative for Berlin's airports was no coincidence. Already in 2002, the Senate withdrew from the municipal employers association in order to impose up to 12 percent pay cuts in the public sector. The Senate, especially the Left Party, worked closely with Verdi, which is mainly linked in Berlin with the SPD and Left Party. The massive cuts in the public service sector were sealed in a private "walk in the woods" between Verdi boss Frank Bsirske and the then Berlin economics senator, Harald Wolf (Left Party, then PDS).

On the decision to privatize ground services at the time, the Left Party wrote, dated April 11, 2008: "This decision also came about with the votes of some of the employees' representatives, who, in a very competitive field, saw future development possibilities in the event of a sale to an investor who would possibly respect tariffs."

The Left Party advocated the policy it maintains up to this day, in common with the declared policy of the Verdi leadership. Their joint response to the fierce airline competition in Europe is not the international solidarity of workers, but rather defence of individual workplaces at the cost of the entire workforce.

Airport workers face a serious challenge. As in countless other conflicts they must conduct a war on

two fronts. They confront not only unscrupulous low-cost companies, but also trade unions like Verdi that have assumed control of the industrial dispute. Its functionaries sit on the company supervisory boards and are working to increase the "competitiveness" of the airports and their companies, i.e., to reduce costs by cutting jobs.



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