Germany: Public transport strike paralyzes Berlin

Our reporters
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Thousands of public transport workers from the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) stopped work on Friday. From 3:30 in the morning to 12 noon, all subways and trams in the capital stood still and most of the buses remained in their depots. At a demonstration in front of BVG headquarters, 4,000 workers underscored their demands for a reduction in working hours and a significant increase in wages .

While workers' anger is enormous, the public sector union Verdi is doing everything in its power to keep the strike under control and stop it spreading. On Wednesday, Verdi called a strike of public sector employees, only to call the BVG to strike two days later. The unions want to prevent the development of a common movement of all workers in Berlin, Germany and throughout Europe.

Verdi has collaborated closely with the parties in the Berlin Senate (state executive) to transform the urban transport operation into a low-wage enterprise, enabling it to make record profits at the expense of the workers. Verdi is now seeking to bring the anger that exists among workers under control through orchestrating the protest actions. The union even struggled to do this at the rally it organized in front of BVG headquarters.

"If nothing happens, things will blow up at BVG," said industrial mechanic David, who works in BVG's own workshops. The problem was the Senate, which has money for all sorts of things but was unwilling to pay workers properly. "BVG has made so much profit. They should use that to increase wages," his colleague Marco added.

As many others at the demonstration also reported, Marco says he cannot live on his wages. After deducting fixed costs, he only has €400 a month. "I cannot afford a car for that, no vacations, not even repairing household appliances." That is why he has been looking for a second job in a security firm, where he can work weekends.

David also lamented the low wages. He was trained as an industrial mechanic and now carries out those duties, but is paid significantly worse by BVG as a vehicle mechanic. In addition, as a new employee, he has to work two-and-a-half hours longer, but receives up to €1,000 less pay than colleagues who were hired before 2005. "We want equal pay so that there are no longer differences between colleagues," he said.

Orkan, a bus driver, earns €1,600 net montly, for which he has to drive for 39 hours. When he was unemployed, he received €1,980 in welfare payments, on the other hand. "If my wife did not also work at BVG, I would have to apply for welfare support."

"Conditions for bus drivers are very bad in Berlin," another worker said, who did not want to give his name, and who has been driving for BVG for six years. "Rents have reached the same high level as in Munich, but not pay." The growing work stress was very debilitating, he said. "We often have to drive for eight hours in a row. It's a miracle that more accidents don't happen."

"If a bus drops out of service, the stress increases enormously and you take it home with you," said Burak. He also complained about the low wages. "Actually, we're only working to pay the rent," he said. "If Verdi agrees to a pittance this time, then we're resigning. But I hope that this time there will be two to three hundred euros more a month."

David and Marco are also sceptical as to whether Verdi will achieve any serious improvements. "Many older colleagues have said they are not coming today because they do not support Verdi," explains David. They have lost more and more of their real wages since 2005 and working conditions have worsened. "We'll see how Verdi does now. Then we'll see if we stick with the union or not."

In addition to Verdi, the smaller sectoral unions NahVG and GKL had also called for a strike. They set up their picket line in front of the head office of BVG subsidiary

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BT, which had been specially set up to further worsen wages and working conditions.

Christoph, with 30 years at BVG, explained, “I am striking for more money. The pay is not exactly rosy, and we live in a city where rents and the cost of living continue to rise.” This was “a common theme in Berlin,” he stressed, pointing to the strike by teachers and other public sector workers just two days earlier. “It is necessary that we finally send a signal.”

The problem was not the workers’ willingness to fight, but the unions. “Verdi says ‘we want to strike now,’ but in the end, they cave in pretty fast. There hasn’t been a proper strike for seven years and workers were always being palmed off with a 2.5 percent rise,” when inflation was running much higher. This was not surprising, since Verdi supports the Berlin Senate and the politics of the grand coalition government [of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats], he said. Above all, he sharply condemned the policy of military rearmament. “I think it is idiotic to put money into the military. That the federal government wants to put 2 percent of gross domestic product into the military, as Donald Trump demands, is very dangerous.”

At both picket lines, supporters of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP, Socialist Equality Party) distributed the statement of the SGP European election candidate and bus driver Andy Niklaus, who is calling on his colleagues to break with the unions and to set up independent action committees. “In the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, workers cannot defend their rights and win any improvements without breaking with the unions and taking the fight into their own hands,” the statement reads.

On the same day, Niklaus received letters both from former colleagues, who had not come to the picket in protest against Verdi, and participants at the rally who expressed interest in forming an independent action committee.

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