German aviation security workers reject union contract

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The 23,000 airport security workers have rejected the contract negotiated by the United Services Workers' Union (Verdi). This was announced by the union on February 18. Fifty-five percent of the Verdi members who took part in a survey did not approve the new contract.

The rejection is a blow against Verdi, which had recommended acceptance of the outcome of the negotiations. As usual, the union had talked up the contract, even though it meant workers making significant concessions to the companies.

Verdi had opened negotiations with the demand for a uniform nationwide hourly wage of 20 euros. Wages currently lie between 11.30 euros and 17.16 euros depending on region and occupation. But after the security workers had demonstrated their willingness to fight in warning strikes at 13 airports, including Frankfurt, Berlin and Stuttgart, Verdi agreed a new contract that fell far short of the original claim.

The contract agreed by Verdi will run for three years and provides for highly differentiated gradual wage increases. The higher the person's original wage, the lower their pay increase, so only the lowest wages will increase in the first year by the 9.77 percent boasted by Verdi. The highest hourly wage was set at 19 euros for employees in passenger control and would only reach this level in three years' time. All other employee groups would earn far less.

The demand for standardized supplements, for example, for night working, Sundays and public holidays and overtime, was rejected completely by the companies. The union and the employers' association stated that after the conclusion of the contract bargaining they wanted to enter into appropriate negotiations on time supplements, occupational allowances and the conversion of wages into additional leisure time within the framework of a new remuneration and collective agreement.

Despite the concessions made by Verdi, Ute Kittel, a member of the Verdi federal executive and responsible for private aviation security, said, "This is a great success for our colleagues in the industry." The deal showed that it was worthwhile being in the union, he said.

Most of the Verdi members obviously saw things differently. At the end of January, many Verdi members were dissatisfied with the result of the contract negotiations. Above all, the maintenance of unequal wages in East and West Germany and the unequal pay development among the various occupational groups caused discontent. At members' meetings, Verdi tried unsuccessfully to urge employees to accept the collective agreement.

The collective agreement could not now come into operation as planned on March 1, 2019, Verdi announced on Monday night. The union had previously invited the Federal Association of Aviation Security Companies (BDLS) to renewed contract negotiations. Verdi wanted to renegotiate "contentious issues" and "further criticisms." What exactly these "members' criticisms" are, Verdi did not explain.

Since Verdi wants to "negotiate in peace" with the companies, the exact "place and times" of the meetings are not being communicated. BDLS President Udo Hansen expressed his "great lack of understanding" about the attitude of the Verdi members, but wanted to take up the union's invitation for further talks, which should take place on several dates in March.

Only after these discussions behind closed doors will the public be informed about the result, the union said. "The negotiations have not failed," said Kittel, at the same time assuring the airlines, "Until the conclusion

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of the talks, there will be no strikes by aviation security at airports." In recent months, there have been repeated strikes and protests in European aviation.

Despite the opposition of its members, Verdi remains true to its policy of acting in the interests of the companies. The fragmentation of pay scales at airports was a consequence of the outsourcing of many areas of the airport and airlines to lower wages. Verdi has always agreed to these manoeuvres.

It is due to this that there are now three different occupational groups among the aviation security workers alone, each with different pay scales. One group checks passengers and their baggage, the second controls airport access and approaches, and the third cargo, mail and catering for aircraft. The demand for nationwide uniform pay scales therefore has received great support.

But a closer look at the now rejected contract shows that this demand, if it goes according to Verdi, would not be implemented in three years. Instead, the union and the employers' association intend to bring in organizational changes to the detriment of the employees in further collective agreements over the next three years.

Once again, it is clear that even the old trade union demand, equal pay for equal work—let alone defending jobs and improving working conditions—can only be enforced against the union.

To this end, action committees independent of the trade union must be formed, which take the struggle into workers' hands and break through Verdi's organized division and isolation of aviation workers. The committees must immediately make contact with airport and airline employees in other locations and in other countries.

Airline workers in Germany must see their own situation in the context of the growing class struggle around the world and turn towards a socialist perspective. The working and living conditions of the working class must no longer be subordinated to the profit interests of the company owners.

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