

One-day transport strike paralyses Berlin

Our reporters
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Thousands of Berlin public transport workers (BVG) went on strike Monday. It was the third and biggest strike by transport workers during the past six weeks. In addition to bus drivers and technicians, tram and metro drivers stopped work, and this time for 24 hours instead of the previous twelve-hour stoppages.

The strike had a massive impact starting early in the morning. Only a few privately operated buses ran, mainly on the outskirts of the city, and the already chaotic traffic in Berlin collapsed with 5,000 taxis stuck in traffic. Long queues formed at S-Bahn rail network stations and travellers only reached Tegel airport after a long walk.

Despite these massive restrictions, many passers-by supported the strike. It is well known that BVG employees are paid very poorly for their strenuous work and highly responsible positions. Many workers quit service due to the low wages and increasing workloads, which worsens the situation for those workers who remain. This not only creates intolerable conditions for employees, but also jeopardises the safety of the almost 3 million passengers who use the BVG transport system every day.

While the BVG executive steps up the exploitation of the workforce, claiming there is no alternative to cuts, they are stuffing their own pockets. CEO Sigrid Nikutta took home almost half a million euros last year—over 40,000 euros a month. Chief financial officer Henrik Haenecke, who previously worked as a management consultant for McKinsey, receives only marginally less, as does HR Director Dirk Schulte, who maintains close contact with the transport workers union. His father is the former head of the German Federation of Trade unions (DGB), Dieter Schulte.

The powerful support for the strike is bound up with the extreme forms of exploitation prevailing not only in the BVG, but also in many other areas of both the private and public sector. In recent years there have

been continuous increases in rents, which has led many workers and their families to conclude that “Things cannot go on this way.” This sentiment is widespread among strikers and the public as a whole.

As workers’ anger increases, the Verdi public service union is feverishly striving to contain opposition and prevent it from expanding. When wage contract bargaining began in February, Verdi called a strike of Berlin public sector employees, but carefully ensured that the BVG strike did not begin until two days later. The union is determined to avoid a joint movement of all workers in Berlin, Germany and the whole of Europe.

Verdi is also trying to prevent an indefinite strike because it could trigger a much broader movement against the despised Berlin Senate and the federal government.

Verdi has worked closely with the political parties represented in the Senate to transform the BVG into a low-wage enterprise with record profit levels—all at the expense of the workforce. But Verdi is increasingly losing control as militancy and anger rises. During the first strike six weeks ago, Verdi organised a central rally outside the BVG headquarters. On Monday, however, Verdi’s intervention was limited to union officials speaking at small protest meetings outside the transport gates.

Verdi negotiator Jeremy Arndt told strikers at the BVG gate in Müllerstrasse, Berlin-Wedding that he expected a deal to be struck at the next round of negotiations. Verdi’s response to the transport workers’ militancy is to enforce a sell-out as soon as possible.

The mood of many strikers towards Verdi fluctuated between mistrust and open enmity. When asked their opinion of Verdi, a number responded by declaring that they had already quit the union.

A young bus driver from Wedding said that he was

fed up with speeches by Verdi bureaucrats who refused to say anything concrete. “I will not come to such rallies in future, you learn nothing anyway.” Another said, “Verdi keeps everything secret. We know nothing. We only find out first from the media, and then their reports are often contradictory.”

Günther, an employee from the central office, said, “I came to support the strike. We cannot allow ourselves to be divided but I'm sceptical about the outcome because Verdi is organising the warning strikes on a decentralised basis. When we demonstrated in front of the BVG headquarters in February, there were several thousand workers there.”

A member of a group of strikers who has a longstanding job contract said, “People are not properly informed by the media. We keep hearing that we should be satisfied with our 36.5-hour week but they forget that the reduction in working hours in 2008 came at a heavy price, a wage reduction of 6.41 percent.”

Another worker added, “Many young bus or tram drivers leave after basic training for other companies. They can earn up to €500 more a month on the S-Bahn and do not have the stress of driving on the road.” A third worker said, “There's more money for new drivers, but only because they are reaching higher salary levels more quickly (level 3). Some wage groups are unlikely to get an increase. We have the worst contract agreement nationwide.”

When Andy Niklaus, a candidate for the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) in the European elections in May, appeared at the Müllerstrasse gate, he was warmly welcomed by fellow workers. Niklaus is a bus driver and has worked for the BVG for 28 years.

“Where should we sign for an all-out strike? Let's do it now!” some colleagues called out. On the occasion of the first strike Niklaus had distributed a leaflet with the headline “No support for Verdi! Build independent action committees! Fight for an international, socialist program!”

An intense discussion about the role of Verdi and the need to organise independently developed amongst a group of workers. One worker said he had left the union long ago and supported the notion of an action committee. He had doubts, however, whether there would be enough support from other colleagues.

Niklaus replied, “If we do not organise independently and make contact with workers in other cities and

countries to fight together, Verdi will continue its cooperation with the Senate and the government—and that will have catastrophic consequences.”

Niklaus stressed that workers could no longer allow themselves to be mere bystanders and leave a corrupt bureaucracy to reach a deal behind their backs. A serious struggle against poor working conditions, unbearable workloads, wage splitting between longstanding workers and new recruits and the decline in transport infrastructure, can only be organised in opposition to Verdi, he said.

Niklaus talked about the situation in Europe. Since the beginning of the year, there had been a massive strike at Audi in Hungary, a general strike in Belgium and mass demonstrations by the Yellow Vests in France, in defiance of the police and state. Workers all over the world faced the same problems and were increasingly fighting back against bad working conditions.

Across the globe the unions are deliberately suppressing struggles and dividing workers on a national and regional basis. “They are not on the side of workers, they are on the side of the companies, and advance a completely nationalist perspective. We have had enough of such a policy at the BVG,” he said urging workers to build new organizations of struggle and to support his international socialist campaign.



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