SGP European election candidate Andreas Niklaus speaks to Berlin bus drivers

“A war must be prevented at all costs”

Our reporters
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Three days before the European elections, Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) candidate Andy Niklaus discussed with his colleagues and other workers at Berlin’s Leopoldplatz and in front of the gate of the BVG bus depot in Berlin-Wedding.

Niklaus distributed his election manifesto, which states, “It is important to use the European elections to set a political signal. It cannot go on like this. It is not only our working conditions at BVG and in most other companies that are becoming increasingly unbearable, the whole political situation is dramatically coming to a head.”

All the discussions revolved around the connection between the growing danger of a third world war, the policies of the federal government, which increasingly follow those of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the cementing of austerity programmes and poor working conditions in workplaces, which are enforced with the active help of the trade unions.

The BVG collective bargaining agreement, whose key points were announced in early April and which was signed last Tuesday by the Verdi union, the local authority employers’ association and BVG management, marks a renewed betrayal of the BVG workers by Verdi.

Celal Celik, who has been a bus driver for BVG subsidiary Berliner Transport GmbH (BT) for five years, summed it up, “Verdi cheats us all the time! The functionaries at the top simply make decisions that are not agreed with us drivers, the ones affected.”

The main demand of the workforce for a reduction in working hours to 36.5 hours per week with no loss of pay had been dropped by Verdi during the bargaining rounds. When Niklaus explained that the three protest strikes that took place during the dispute had shown the strength and combat readiness of BVG workers, many agreed.

In tandem with the transport workers’ dispute, tens of thousands of public sector workers took part in protest strikes against the catastrophic situation in schools, their unbearable working conditions and miserable wages. A few weeks ago, 40,000 had protested in Berlin against rising rents, demanding the expropriation of the real estate companies and hedge funds.

“In France, the yellow vests are protesting, teachers are striking in Poland, car workers are striking in Romania, the Czech Republic and Serbia, and in Hungary mass protests are taking place against the Orbán government’s so-called ‘slave law’,” said Niklaus. He emphasised, “We all have to fight together because we have the same opponent—the big corporations, the respective governments and the EU. But Verdi and the other trade unions use their entire apparatus to suppress any common struggle.”

Instead of organizing a joint fight against low-wage labour, social cuts and military rearmament, Verdi keeps each industrial action strictly separate and tries to fob off workers who have been faced with real wage losses for around 20 years with a few extra euros in their wages, explained Niklaus.

Celal said the wage increase agreed was too little, because the costs of rent, electricity and water are constantly rising. “What are around 300 euros [a month] more today? I have three children; we pay 800 euros rent and I only earn 1,800 euros net.”

But Celal is not just concerned about his working and living conditions. He regards the threats of the Trump

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administration against Iran as very worrying. “The next war against Iran can mean the end of this world,” he said. “Then, all the money in the world will not help us anymore.” The machinations of the US and its allies must be uncovered, “as Julian Assange has done,” because “a war must be prevented,” demanded Celal.

When Niklaus pointed out that the SGP demands the freedom of Julian Assange and held an impressive rally with speakers from Britain and France, and greetings from the US and Australia in Berlin last Saturday, Celal welcomed this unreservedly.

For Ismael, also a BT bus driver, the fight against the growing threat of war is of crucial importance. The driver, who came from Egypt, was particularly interested in the question of who gave the governments of the US and Israel the right to call Iran a rogue state. That has nothing to do with a serious assessment of the policy in Tehran, he said. The US government only believes in “the law of the strongest,” according to Ismael. “The US has been waging many wars in the Middle East for years!”

“The whole history of the Middle East after World War II shows that there is no national solution to prevent wars,” Ismael says, pointing to the disappointment of Egyptian workers after the military crushed the *Arab Spring*.

Andy Niklaus stressed that the only way forward for the working class in the Middle East is to fight for the unity of Jewish, Arab and all workers to create the United Socialist States of the Middle East. Only in this way could nationalism be finally eliminated. Ismael agreed, adding that this was the only way the fragmentation of workers in the Middle East could be overcome. “This also applies to Europe,” he says. “Here, too, a war is possible. What they did with Greece was a kind of war, an economic war.”

Ahmet Asildas, a BVG bus driver, joined in the conversation and said, “The real reason for a war against Iran is clearly oil. It’s not about skin colour or race, it’s about oil!”

Ismael and Ahmet see the need for workers to unite across borders and therefore support the fight against the nationalist policies of Verdi and the other unions.

Niklaus has often discussed the creation of action committees with his colleagues and explained the position of the SGP. Now Ismael said, “Setting up action committees would be something new. It would finally bring unity among us workers.” Ahmet added, “We all want good working conditions and a good wage to live on. But as it stands now, Verdi has given up the fight for them.”

Niklaus pointed to his election manifesto, which reads, “Verdi and all other unions are doing everything they can to defend the government and suppress a broad political mobilization against military rearmament and collaboration with the AfD.”

He then stressed that the working class needed its own party to combine the fight against war with the fight against capitalism, poverty and hardship. Niklaus added, “That is why it is so important to vote in the European elections on Sunday for the SGP, and to actively participate in its construction!”

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