Germany: Bus drivers strike in Hesse and Saarland

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Last Friday, 1,500 bus drivers in Frankfurt, Giessen, Darmstadt, Kassel, Offenbach, Hanau and Fulda took part in a 24-hour protest strike against the Hesse Bus Providers Regional Association (LHO). They called for long-overdue pay increases and better holidays.

For similar reasons, workers at bus companies in Saarbrücken, Neunkirchen, Saarlouis and Völklingen have already been already on strike for more than a week. As in Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate, the third round of collective bargaining in the Saarland failed, and the Communal Employers Association (KAV) refuses to pay reasonable wages.

In Saarland, a two-day protest strike took place on September 24 and 25. In a ballot last week, bus drivers then agreed by 99.6 percent to an indefinite strike. The almost 100 percent support for the strike is another example of the growing willingness of the working class to fight. It is the result of an increasingly unbearable social situation.

In Saarland, many bus drivers earn just €1,500 net per month, even though they must drive around the clock, including Saturdays, Sundays, holidays and at night. Their wages are not enough to manage on, especially for those with a family. A bus driver told broadcaster Saarländischer Rundfunk, “I’m sorry for the children who have to go to school, I’m also sorry for the parents. But they must understand us: We *really* need more money. It can’t go on like this.”

In Frankfurt, bus driver Bektas, who has been behind the wheel for 15 years, said that nothing had changed for the better since the last contract in March 2017: “My net salary is €1,900 a month, which is by no means enough. I have two children. Just for the rent, you have to pay €1,200 [a month] in Frankfurt. Then there’s electricity and heating costs, telephone, kindergarten expenses for both children, up to €1,000 a year for car tax and insurance, not including gasoline.”

With unpaid turnaround and break times, Bektas went on to say that he has to spend 14 to 15 hours a day at work. “But that means nobody else in the family can work, because who else would look after the children?”

Workers report that it is not easy, especially in a city like Frankfurt, to stay calm as a bus driver. “We are always under pressure and often people have little or no understanding for us,” said one driver. Delays and late running are the order of the day. “Often I have three tours in a row without a single break. This is a bone-breaking job.”

On the picket line at the Frankfurt Griesheim bus depot, bus driver and works council representative Oktay Zorba explained, “What bothers bus drivers the most is that we just feel treated unfairly. Bus drivers in Hesse, who work really hard and do a responsible job, earn less than in other federal states, even though Hesse is one of the richest. There is no appreciation for us. Our hourly wage is less than €14; we don’t agree with that.”

Two years ago, bus drivers in Hesse took strike action for two weeks for better working conditions. “Little has changed since then,” a driver said. “Break times still not counted in our wages. The promised retirement benefits have not materialised at all.”

Bus drivers still remember the strike two years ago. Many workers at that time were dissatisfied with the way it ended. At that time, the service union Verdi had only scheduled a two-day protest strike to “let off steam.” Due to the willingness of the bus drivers to fight, the strike had to be extended from day to day. The strike also enjoyed much support and sympathy among the population. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of it, the union leadership broke it off after two weeks without further ado.

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The result of the conciliation process brought nothing. Nothing fundamental was changed regarding the irregular working hours and exhausting conditions. In the meantime, almost three years later, the drivers' extremely low wages have since been raised from €12 gross to €13.50—just 50 cents a year.

"We were really disappointed at the time," says Youness, a bus driver in Frankfurt-Griesheim. "We were sent back to work without knowing or agreeing on the result. It has not solved our problems."

Once again, bus drivers are not only confronted with the employers. Their main problem is the Verdi union and the parties it works closely with—the Social Democrats (SPD), the Left Party and the Greens. The transformation of such public services into a broad low-paid sector would not have been possible without their active support from the outset. In Hesse, the bus companies were privatised and hived off from the Public Passenger Transport Services (ÖPNV).

For this reason, bus drivers today have to deal with the LHO private regional association and its managing director, Volker Tuchan, who would never be able to operate a fully occupied bus safely through the rush hour. Tuchan loudly complained about the "unrealistic maximum demands" that allegedly could not form "the basis for serious negotiations," as LHO claims.

Verdi has demanded the basic salary be increased to €16.60 gross in Hesse for several years, as well as five days more holiday. But from the outset, it only called out a third of the 4,400 bus drivers in the sector on strike.

Verdi officials have repeatedly emphasised their willingness to end the strike as soon as possible. Although the employers are calling for a five-year wage contract, to bind workers over a long term, the union keeps reassuring them of their willingness to talk. For example, Christian Umlauf, Verdi negotiator in the Saarland, told Saarländischer Rundfunk, "We are in a position to come to the negotiating table and reach an agreement at any time." Jochen Koppel, the union negotiator in Hesse, repeats the same line while encouraging illusions in the Hesse Christian Democrat-Green state government.

Undoubtedly, bus drivers enjoy the sympathy of overwhelming sections of the population, because now 40 percent of employees have to work in similar low-wage sectors. This applies today to nurses and caregivers, educators, airport employees, garbage operatives, temporary workers in the automotive and steel industries, etc.

This is why it is necessary that workers organise independently of the unions. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) propose that workers in all factories should set up action committees that operate independently of the unions and which unite workers on a socialist programme nationwide and internationally.

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