

German bus drivers in state of Hesse on strike

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Around 4,400 bus drivers at private bus operators in the German state of Hesse launched an open-ended strike at 2:30 a.m. on Tuesday. A vote last week returned a majority of 99.5 percent in favour of open-ended job action. The strike covers 22 municipalities, including Frankfurt am Main, Kassel, Giessen, Fulda, Hanau, Langen, Darmstadt and Offenbach.

The strike has once again brought to light the gruelling working conditions faced by the roughly 130,000 bus drivers across the country. These include low wages, permanent stress, excessively long early, late, and weekend shifts, time- and nerve-intensive “split” shifts and unpaid transfer times. Due to the low wages, drivers who put up with this constant stress on a daily basis are destined to live in poverty in old age.

In the fifth round of bargaining, the State Association of Hesse Bus Companies (LHO) merely offered drivers a pay increase in stages from €13.50 to €15.60 per hour over a four-year period. This will do nothing to change the starvation wages, which is insufficient for a decent standard of living in the expensive Rhein-Main region.

Volker Tuchar, head of business operations for the LHO, arrogantly wrote on the association’s website, “Hesse’s bus operators cannot finance any pie-in-the-sky proposal from the unions.” He added threateningly, “The demands would bankrupt small and medium-sized businesses in Hesse.” The LHO complained that private bus operators in Saarland were recently forced to agree to terms that went beyond their economic means. To avoid bankruptcy, many companies there have removed their concession prices, added the association.

Bus drivers bear no responsibility for the problems confronting small businesses. On the contrary, these companies were only able to make profits because the bus drivers have for years sacrificed their time, mental wellbeing and health, and those of their families. The complaints of the corporate executives only expose the balance of the past quarter century, which has witnessed the deregulation and privatisation of large chunks of the public sector at the expense of working people.

It is beyond question that today, bus drivers urgently require higher wages, improved working conditions and a decent provision for their retirement. The lack of personnel alone makes improvements essential, since there are currently not even enough staff to maintain a normal bus service.

However, no fundamental changes will be achieved if the leadership of their struggle remains in the hands of Verdi.

The union has only issued modest demands. Instead of the offered wage increase to €15.60, Verdi is calling for €16.60. However, it is not saying what timeframe it proposes for this. In Saarland, the union accepted a four-year contract. This would include four years of labour peace, during which strikes would not be permitted.

The union has made further demands that are obviously not meant to be taken seriously, such as five extra holidays. Its call for better retirement provisions, made during the last strike in 2017, have yet to materialize. Verdi is also calling for two additional holidays for trade union members, an obvious privilege that appears aimed at encouraging bus drivers to join the union.

Verdi is extremely sensitive to the interests of the companies. The preamble of Verdi’s 2014 contract with Hesse Public Transport, for example, declares, “This collective agreement is aimed at creating and retaining the competitiveness of public transport companies.”

In this spirit, the trade unions in the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) and the parties tied to them, the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party, have cooperated with the conservative Christian Democrats and Free Democrats to organise the expansion of private business operations. They have transformed the public sector into a huge low-wage zone, freeing up vast resources for the financial elite to invest capital and extract profits.

In this context, public transport was also decimated. An advertising brochure for the Frankfurt public transport company traffiQ, gives a description of how the bus operations have been streamlined since the end of the 1990s. In 2001, it states, a decision was taken “to

outsource operations from the municipality to an arms-length local contractor, which then parcelled bus operations into five bundles tailored to small and medium-sized businesses.

“The transformation occurred seamlessly. From 2004, one bundle was privatised per year. Despite the demanding quality standards, a 25 percent cost reduction was achieved in comparison to the already reduced price of the existing public transport. One could say success across the board.”

On the road to this “success,” the costs of which were borne entirely by the workers, every contract and agreement was signed by the trade unions. Jochen Koppel, a Verdi strike leader, sits on the supervisory board of the Frankfurt Public Transport Association (VGF). He has collaborated closely for years with people like Klaus Österling, Frankfurt’s Social Democrat transport commissioner, and Volker Sparmann, the former head of the Rhein-Main Public Transport Alliance Ltd. (RMV). Two years ago, Sparmann served as an arbitrator and right-hand man of Green Party state Minister of Transport Tariq al-Wazir, playing a major role in shutting down the last bus drivers’ strike.

This year, Verdi delayed calling the present open-ended strike as long as possible, even though the previous contract had already expired in March 2019. This is in spite of the determination of bus drivers to fight back, demonstrated in one-day job actions called in October and November.

Until the last minute, Verdi sought a few concessions from the companies in order to dupe the workers into accepting an agreement. Last Thursday, a fifth round of bargaining took place with the private companies. For Verdi, the strike is above all a means for the workers to let off steam.

The trade union has been careful to ensure that the strike does not develop into a broader movement. For example, they have separated the bus drivers’ struggle from other public transport workers. On Tuesday and Wednesday, the first two days of the strike, workplace assemblies were held for VGF employees in Frankfurt, where tram, underground, and light rail drivers are working under ever more demanding conditions. But calling on all drivers to take joint strike action is the last thing on Verdi’s mind.

When one-day strikes began in September, bus drivers in Saarland were in the midst of a two-week strike. But Verdi ensured that these strikes were kept separate. In Saarland, the union divided employees of the municipal bus operators from those employed by private companies.

The union has done nothing to form a common struggle with bus drivers at the BVG in Berlin, who are confronted with attacks on their Christmas bonus. This would be anathema to Verdi, which is focused on preventing such joint struggles at all costs.

It is impossible to improve the working conditions of bus drivers and employees at other companies through Verdi and the trade unions as a whole. To achieve anything, bus drivers must therefore take control of the strike into their own hands. To this end, the *World Socialist Web Site* and Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) propose the creation of rank-and-file action committees.

Such committees would take their decisions according to the needs of the working class, not the dictates of the bankers, shareholders, and large investors. They would broaden the struggle to include all workers employed in public service. It is an outrage that in the 21st century, nurses, elder-care workers, teachers, tram drivers and rubbish collection workers labour under needless stress, unbearable working conditions, and low wages.

During the last strike three years ago, after being compelled by mass opposition to continue the strike for two weeks, Verdi ultimately shut down the contract and imposed a rotten concessions deal. The lessons of this struggle must be drawn.

The Hesse bus drivers’ strike occurs under conditions of a revival of the class struggle in Germany and internationally. In Stuttgart yesterday, thousands of autoworkers and auto parts workers threatened with layoffs at Daimler, Bosch and other companies demonstrated. Around the world, mass strikes and protests have occurred in Spain, the Czech Republic, Bolivia, Chile, Hong Kong, Lebanon and elsewhere. At the same time, the imperialist governments, including Germany, are rearming for war and dictatorship. It is time to draw the lessons of history and turn to a socialist programme.



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