

“It’s bordering on slavery how they treat us”

Bus drivers in Hesse, Germany, discuss their strike

Marianne Arens
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Bus drivers employed by private companies in the German state of Hesse have been on strike since November 19. They are resisting scandalously low wages and exploitative working conditions. The drivers voted 99.5 percent for open-ended strike action in a strike ballot.

The Verdi trade union is demanding a pay increase for the 4,400 drivers from the current €13.50 to €16.60 per hour. Volker Tuchan, the head of the Hesse State Association of Bus Operators (LHO), declared the demand to be “very excessive.” The bus operators’ last offer was a gradual wage increase to €15.60 over four years.

Verdi has failed to take a firm stance on the time period for the wage increase. The trade union has been complicit in the attacks on wages and working conditions over the past 15 years, helping impose them on bus drivers. The *World Socialist Web Site* and Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) propose the formation of rank-and-file action committees to take control of the strike out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and expand it to all bus drivers across Germany and Europe. This struggle requires a socialist perspective.

Last Thursday, on the third day of the strike, the struggle was broadened. Bus traffic came to a standstill in 25 municipalities across Hesse, including all major cities. In Darmstadt, half of the city’s tram drivers also joined a solidarity strike. Virtually no buses were on the roads in Hanau, even though the owner of one of the bus depots offered additional payments to strike-breakers.

At the DB Regio bus depot in the west of Frankfurt, 100 percent of drivers observed the strike. No buses had left the depot in three days. Groups of bus drivers stood together in the strike tent.

“We feel sorry for the passengers,” said one. “It isn’t our intention to cause them problems, but we have no

other choice than to fight for our rights.”

“We bus drivers are really fed up,” stated Afrim*, who has been a bus driver for over 10 years. “Since April, 1, 2019, we have been working without a contract, but negotiations only began half a year later.” Higher wages should have been paid since April and working conditions should have improved significantly.

“This must be widely known by the public,” stated Pierre, an older bus driver. “We don’t get a Christmas bonus and only receive a small amount of holiday pay. Our wages are so low that we have to assume that we will live in poverty in old age.” One worker talked about receiving €300 holiday pay, “All before tax, of course. There’s not much left over.”

“What will be left for our pension?” asked another worker. “For me, after 45 years, it’s just €1,100. But in Frankfurt, you can pay that for rent alone.”

Johanna, a bus driver, explained that the most important thing for her in the strike is the issue of breaks. She firmly believes that the current regulations for breaks need to be changed, commenting, “We lose pay for breaks that we don’t even have. Transition times are calculated at 14 minutes, but in practice we drive constantly, without breaks. And then there’s the split shifts. We’re often on the go for 14 hours, but we’re only paid for eight hours of work.”

Pierre explained, “We get paid for 169.5 hours, but we’ve worked 210 [per month]. We lose 30 to 40 hours per month because they are deemed to be breaks. I calculated how much my effective hourly wage is and reached the conclusion of €11.05. That’s the reality, and in an expensive city like Frankfurt.”

Enrico added, “I leave the house in the dark in the morning, and return home after dark at night, often when the children are already in bed.”

Others say they are forced to have a car because they have to drive to their shifts. “All of the time spent driving to and from work is unpaid.” Afrim explained, “I start early in the morning, often have a break of three to four hours in the middle of the day, but I can’t go home because it’s not worth it. Then I have to work until 9 p.m.”

The workers pointed to another problem that could have deadly consequences, the reduction of time given over to vehicle checks prior to departure. “For us, checks are restricted to six minutes, but this is far too little time. Three years ago, it was 12 minutes.”

Bus drivers are under so much stress that incidents are simply not allowed to happen. “The employer offers us absolutely no protection, when there are issues with passengers, if we’re insulted or attacked for being late. It’s tough,” said Johanna.

“And we don’t even get an employee pass for the public transport system, even though we are bus drivers!” added Pierre. Colleagues find that “unfair.” One said, “We’re worth less to those at the top than the dirt under their fingernails.”

On Facebook, pages for bus drivers in other German states are full of encouraging comments for the strikers.

“Best of luck to you!” wrote a bus driver from North Rhine-Westphalia to striking colleagues in Hesse. “In general, we have nobody lobbying for us, because our daily work and the structures associated with it are either not understood or difficult for outsiders to see. Driving isn’t even the main problem for us. It’s split shifts and holiday periods, constant stress, increasingly tight driving schedules, increasingly irritable customers, sleep disruption and the illnesses associated with that, and ultimately the increasing impossibility of reconciling our career with our family life.”

Luigi from Baden-Württemberg confirmed that the issue is less the rate of pay and more the distribution throughout the day of unpaid breaks. He has also experienced being paid an effective hourly rate of less than €10 for a 12 to 13-hour-long day. “And with that we are still doing well. I’ve heard from colleagues who have even more breaks.”

Mike wrote ironically that the unions’ “steadfastness for half a year” proves their seriousness and firm conviction. “Verdi is a paper tiger. Me, a trade union? Never. Nonetheless, hold out guys!”

Sven added, “After 30 years, get equal wages at long last! ! Enough is enough! ! We aren’t voluntary workers!! ! Work-life balance! ! Then you don’t need to complain about anything!! ! A basic wage of €17 per hour!

Recognition!!”

Tony responded, “You’re forgetting one thing, in contrast to you, the Verdi officials never have to fear for their jobs. On the contrary, as soon as they get their post in Berlin or Brussels, they’re laughing at you.”

At the Frankfurt bus depot, discussions also turned to Verdi, the Social Democrats, Green Party, and the Left party.

“It is an outrage that we earn less here than in other states,” said Afrim. “It’s all thanks to [former CDU Minister President] Roland Koch. The bus companies were privatised under his watch.”

Another intervened to say that all of the parties were responsible for public services being decimated, stating, “The course was set by the SPD/Green federal government under [former chancellor Gerhard] Schröder and [former Green Party leader Joschka] Fischer.” It is also widely recognised that the Left Party, when it was in the state government in Berlin, sold all of the apartments that are now unaffordable “for next to nothing.”

Afrim remarked, “These politicians are bribed, 100 percent. Whatever big business and the banks say is done. And it’s bordering on slavery how they treat us.”

Enrico added that he doesn’t believe that Verdi will achieve any change. “All bus drivers in Germany would have to strike together,” he added. “Then we would maybe get somewhere. If it came to that, we would be prepared to continue striking unpaid.”

* We have changed all of the bus drivers’ names in this article at their request. As bus driver “Pierre” put it, “It’s better not to put anyone in the stocks. What does it matter what our names are? You could ask any bus driver and they’d tell you the same thing.”



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