

WISAG ground services slashes hundreds of jobs at Berlin Tegel Airport

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News of the destruction of about 800 jobs at WISAG Ground Services Tegel hit like lightning two weeks ago. This represents more than half of all ground services jobs at Tegel and Schoenefeld airports.

At the works meeting, which took place last Friday in a hangar at Tegel airport, the company announced it had gone into voluntary insolvency. This means July wages would only be paid as part of the insolvency proceedings and 350 employees would be laid off. In the next two months, they would still receive their wages, then it would be the end of the line for everyone at Tegel Airport. Only a small, hand-picked group of about 60 foremen and more highly qualified employees would be taken over to Schoenefeld.

The temporary workers, who are losing or have already lost their jobs, even independently of the insolvency proceedings, and whose number is probably over 400, were not mentioned at all.

The news came as a real hammer blow. The vicious treatment of these workers, who carry out heavy manual labour at the airport under great time pressure—passenger processing, baggage loading, apron work when refuelling the aircraft, marshalling the aircraft, ground transport, etc.—cannot be underestimated.

Voluntary insolvency is a special legal procedure that allows WISAG to circumvent contractually agreed redundancy measures worth some €14 million. It also means reducing the period of notice from seven to three months. The attacks on the workforce are not being planned by an insolvency administrator but by the company itself. In the end, they will be given a judicial stamp so that everything can be mercilessly enforced with the authority of the courts and state power.

Most of those affected, around 75 percent, receive wages in the lowest income groups, E1 to E4, which corresponds to an hourly wage of between €11.10 and €13.20. For full-time employment, this amounts to around €1,600 to at most €2,000 gross per month.

Anyone who has been working in airport ground services for 20 or 30 years, and therefore earns a little more and perhaps still has a claim to a company pension or a better social plan, also loses everything.

The Verdi trade union had already prepared itself for the job cuts in 2018 during the closure of Tegel, and had agreed to the departure of the old employees with a severance payment as part of a social plan. Under this agreement, the severance payment amounted to up to 15 months' salary. As a result of the insolvency, this will now be reduced to a maximum of 2.5 months' salary. One of WISAG's main objectives is to get rid of these people and their claims to a social plan and a company pension.

The situation is even worse for those working part-time and bringing home at most between €1,000 and €1,300 (net) per month. Quite a few are dependent on having their wages supplemented by housing benefit or Hartz-IV welfare payments at the JobCenter. They will receive almost no unemployment benefit and be entirely dependent on Hartz-IV payments. Especially single women are affected by this.

Most ground service employees are employed on temporary contracts or

by subcontractors, often coming from eastern or southeastern European countries. They usually earn less than €10 an hour and have to pay €300 for shared accommodation.

These foreign temporary workers were the first victims of earlier job cuts. "They were laid off long ago, right at the beginning of the pandemic," Thomas N., who works for WISAG Aviation in Berlin, told the WSWS. "The Romanians were gone within an hour." German temporary workers will also be dismissed at short notice based on the collective bargaining agreement for temporary workers.

But those remaining are also affected. Since March, they have been on short-time work, receiving just 60 or 67 percent of their salary. In addition, WISAG simply suspended the recently signed collective agreement when the pandemic measures began. This agreement was itself lousy: an in-house collective agreement that only provided for a wage increase of €400 spread over three years.

The first instalment of €150 had been agreed for last March. Thomas N. reports, "With the pandemic as the reason, even that was simply cancelled. As justification, Verdi secretary Enrico Rümker claimed that WISAG would pay the wage increase twice next year. This is all nonsense!"

How Verdi works with WISAG

When WISAG announced the job cuts two weeks ago, Verdi expressed its "surprise" in a press release and called for "talks" with the employer.

The surprise could not have been that great. After all, numerous trade union secretaries and works council members belonging to Verdi—such as the Verdi district chief for Frankfurt, Roswitha Haus—occupy well-paid positions on the supervisory board of the WISAG holding company AVECO or—such as Enrico Rümker, Holger Rößler and Jens Gröger—on the supervisory board of Flughafen Berlin Brandenburg GmbH. There, too, 400 employees will be laid off. The union secretaries and works council representatives are closely enmeshed with the company.

For example, one day before the works meeting, in a press release, Verdi proposed the establishment of a "transfer company," in which dismissed employees would be "parked" for a year.

Such transfer or employment companies were invented by the unions in the 1980s to break the resistance of steelworkers to mass dismissals. In the early 1990s, the unions then used them to suppress industrial action against the closure of hundreds of factories in former East Germany. They offer no protection against unemployment and poverty in old age but serve as marshalling yards for such outcomes. They have proved so efficient that their regulation as a state-sponsored measure was included in the Social Security Code in 1998.

Today, Verdi no longer even pretends to oppose the redundancies, but

openly supports WISAG's mass redundancy plans by proposing a transfer company as an accompanying measure. One reason for this is it fears that even a hollow protest demonstration could slip out of its control and become the trigger for major spontaneous industrial action.

This fear is justified. For many years, Berlin airport employees can thank an unholy alliance of the trade unions and state governments under the Social Democrats (SPD), Left Party and the Greens for their ever-worsening working conditions, speed-ups and lower wages.

A milestone was reached in 2003 when the SPD-Left Party Senate (state executive) withdrew from the federal public service wage agreement, which at the time also applied to airport service company GlobeGround, and which was still owned by the states of Berlin and Brandenburg. This was the green light for the wage dumping spiral that then followed.

Four years later, Verdi organised a "reduction collective agreement." Under the threat of otherwise imminent insolvency, employees were forced to forgo a fifth of their salary. This made the company attractive to WISAG for takeover and it was fully privatised in 2008. As a reward for his efforts, Ingo Kronsfoth, then head of the Verdi specialist group for air transport, became a managing director at WISAG.

This opened the way for the special WISAG system of wage dumping. The entire company of Frankfurt Social Democrat Claus Wisser operates according to the same principle: the brutal exploitation of low-wage labour, finely thought out and carefully coordinated and organized with the trade unions Verdi, IG Metall and IG BAU. Even according to trade union data, wages in 2012 were on average 30 percent below the level before privatisation.

In addition to WISAG ground services, the building and room cleaning crews of Facility Service GmbH and the pool of temporary workers (for the automotive industry) of WISAG Industrie Service Holding GmbH are also part of the network of subsidiaries of the WISAG corporation, which employs a total of over 51,000 people. In cooperation with subcontractors, they ensure that all those from the army of temporary workers can be transferred in good time to another WISAG company before otherwise acquiring a legal entitlement to permanent employment after two years of service in the same company.

The sell-out of the 2017 strike

A further milestone in the attacks on ground service workers was Verdi's ending of the massive strike for a nationwide collective agreement and wage increases in 2017. Almost 99 percent of union members had voted for an indefinite strike, but the union simply called off the strike after three days, even though the employers had made no concessions whatsoever.

While the union leaders were still loudly proclaiming to the outside world that the national collective agreement was an "objective," they had long since begun to arrange in-house contracts with minimal increases behind closed doors at one airport after another. This was also the case in Berlin. The result of the negotiations was sharply condemned by most workers and rejected in the subsequent vote, especially since it meant only a minimal pay increase. The union did not contest this, simply signing the collective agreement anyway.

The result is today's appalling working conditions and wage levels for employees at Berlin airports. The insolvency is now intended to ensure that profit margins for WISAG continue to climb thanks to low wages at the new BER airport, scheduled to start operations on October 31.

What this means for the families of those dismissed, both permanent and temporary workers, can easily be calculated. The shocking results of a study by the Bertelsmann Foundation recently became known: 21.3

percent of all children and young people under 18 grow up in Germany in poverty and precarious circumstances, half of them in families of those receiving Hartz IV benefits. WISAG and similar corporations and their stooges in the unions and political parties are the authors and profiteers of these conditions.

The mass dismissals that have now been announced have also been prepared for a long time. Two years ago, Verdi had already concluded a collective agreement on a social plan for the closure of Tegel. The coronavirus pandemic and the closure of Tegel airport, planned for the end of October, are now being used as an excuse to get rid of workers in the higher income groups and to exploit the remaining workforce even more.

These attacks are part of a global class war against workers in all industries. In Germany, the closures, mass layoffs and wage cuts in aviation, automotive, engineering, tourism and other industries are taking on proportions that even exceed those of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

While the population is being driven into unemployment and poverty, the corporations, banks and speculators receive billions from the state. Billions are cut in education, schools and infrastructure and used for military rearmament. It is high time to take up the fight against these attacks of the capitalists and their government!

The unions are on the side of the companies and defend the capitalist system. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) therefore advocates the establishment of action committees in aviation which take the defence of jobs and wages into their own hands, coordinate them nationwide and unite them with the struggle of workers in other branches of industry in Germany and other countries of Europe and internationally.

This struggle must be conducted based on a socialist programme. Billionaires and millionaires like Claus Wisser and their corporations, banks and real estate companies must be expropriated without compensation, their companies placed under the democratic control of the working class. Only by freeing society from the dictates of the profit interests of a tiny rich minority and by reorganising it based on the needs of the working population can the right to work and a decent income be ensured.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei invite all WISAG workers to contact them, participate in their meetings and discuss these policies.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact