

Protest strikes in German public transit: Workers' anger grows over unsafe working conditions

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In the past week, public transport workers in numerous German cities have stopped work. While the union wants to limit the dispute to a set of minimum demands, anger is growing among the workers over miserable wages and completely unsafe working conditions.

Last Tuesday, buses and trains in Kassel, Wiesbaden and Frankfurt were hit by strike action, followed by Bremen and cities in Lower Saxony on Wednesday. On Thursday, depots throughout North Rhine-Westphalia remained closed for a whole day, and on Friday there was a full-day strike by the BVG public transit workers in Berlin and Brandenburg and a strike by bus drivers in Munich.

The trade union Verdi is demanding a nationwide collective agreement framework for the 87,000 employees of approximately 130 municipal transport companies. The agreement is to lay down minimum standards regarding vacation days, overtime pay and shift allowances. In some federal states, Verdi is also calling for shorter working hours or shorter shifts.

The negotiations do not deal with specific wage and salary levels. These are laid out in numerous individual collective agreements—which the union and employers have used in recent years to divide the workers from different companies and regions—but exclusively with framework collective agreements regulating working hours, conditions, etc. Even if Verdi's limited demands were implemented, little would change in terms of the miserable wages and working conditions.

But as the experience of the last decades shows, Verdi collaborates with the employers to push through ever new cuts against the workers. When the trade union calls for protest strikes, it is reacting, above all, to the enormous anger that has accumulated among workers inside the companies, especially during the pandemic. It is a means

to let off steam and prevent any independent actions and to ensure that transport operations are maintained even under the adverse and dangerous conditions of the pandemic.

This is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that Verdi has not included a single demand for occupational safety under pandemic conditions within the framework agreements. To properly ensure the safety of drivers and passengers, all buses and trains must be equipped with modern air filters, vehicles disinfected at every shift change and the number of passengers strictly limited.

If, as is currently the case, the number of infections increases explosively, regular operations must be suspended. Instead, special buses with particular equipment, disinfection and specially protected personnel must be used to transport personnel necessary to maintain basic medical and public services. But Verdi has nothing to offer in this regard.

For many workers, on the other hand, it is precisely these life-threatening working conditions that are their main concern. "I live in a high-risk area and was given a bus to drive with a torn tarpaulin in front of the cab," Kaya, a driver for BVG, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The operations control centre asked me to drive through a hotspot with an 80 percent passenger load. I refused."

A colleague at the BVG subsidiary Berlin Transport, who wished to remain anonymous, reported thoroughly unsafe working conditions. "Today, only eight out of 250 buses are washed every night. The remaining vehicles are not disinfected and go back into operation having only been swept. When taking over a bus, the driver's seat must first be wiped down, not only because it is dirty, but because of the virus. Anyone who does not have his own disinfectant with him and cannot clean the steering wheel,

including the entire driver's workplace, is stuck."

The general condition of the vehicles was just as big a "catastrophe" as their hygiene conditions. "The majority of buses are just scrap metal. Ventilation filters and pollen filters are not replaced or renewed—this increases the risk of infection. I bought a mask from the pharmacy myself because the masks we receive from BVG would have to be thrown away after two hours. Masks should be handed out every day, even for those on late duty."

In a service instruction in March, i.e., at the then high point of the pandemic, BVG even said that drivers were not permitted to wear a face mask while driving, although the road traffic regulations would permit this. In contrast to passengers, who could wear masks, drivers were placed at the mercy of COVID-19 aerosols without protection.

"Verdi is unbelievable," the transport worker continued. "One could have said, 'Yes: The strike funds are full, now it's time for a real strike!' But instead, they don't even fight for protection among the private drivers, who often only have to drive around with a warning tape in the bus."

A tram driver from Munich described the measures taken to deal with the virus by the local transit company MVG there as "ridiculous." She found it particularly "difficult" that in the Bavarian capital, only bus drivers were called on to strike. "I thought to myself, 'Great, now we'll pull in our tails again and only let the bus drivers go on strike'."

Many colleagues associate the lack of infection protection with the already miserable working conditions. "I was shocked when I read what colleagues who work for private companies driving buses earn," a Munich tram driver told the WWS. "I thought we MVG people were badly paid, but it gets worse." The strikes had shown that workers are slowly waking up. "More and more people are starting to think the same because they realize that the individual can achieve nothing, and that collective action can cause fear [for the employers]."

Kaya noted, "Our shifts are getting longer and longer. Especially during the pandemic, there have been cutbacks and savings again: Here, some things were added [to our duties], there, turnaround time was stolen—even more than before coronavirus! That happened pretty fast, so it was well thought out from above."

A colleague added, "In some weeks, I feel burnt out and so broken that I often fall asleep sitting at home. The rest period between duties should be increased to at least 14 hours—how many times has each of us fallen asleep for a second!"

The strike raises a very fundamental social question: Will the pandemic be given free rein, so as not to jeopardize the profits of the banks and corporations—or will the greatest efforts be made to protect the vast majority of the population from the deadly virus?

This is one of the reasons why the strikers enjoy overwhelming solidarity among the general population, despite the restrictions this imposes. A recent Forsa flash poll shows that almost two-thirds of those surveyed (63 percent) have sympathy for the protest strikes.

Employers and the media, however, are conducting a dirty campaign against the striking workers. The *Berliner Tagesspiegel*, for example, writes that the workers—who risk their lives every day to maintain public transport—are not entitled to shorter working hours because BVG has lost revenues due to the pandemic and the state has already spent billions to save large corporations. According to the paper, the strike has led to "the viruses celebrating another travelling coronavirus party."

BVG also claimed that the striking workers were responsible for rising infection figures. "Given rising coronavirus cases, the warning strike, planned for a full 24 hours, also comes at a completely wrong time and exposes our passengers to an unnecessary health risk," the company announced.

It is the companies and governments at state and federal level that have driven the explosion in infection rates with the completely unsafe reopening of businesses and schools and unsafe public transport. To secure their profits, they are willing to walk over dead bodies.

The transit strikes, on the other hand, show the only way to stop this madness and protect workers from mass infection. They must be extended indefinitely to the whole of Germany and made the starting point for a general strike. Workers must not resume work until safe working conditions can be guaranteed.

This requires the establishment of independent action committees, directed not only against the government and corporations but also against the trade unions, who regard their role as enforcing the dictates of the companies against the workers and ensuring that transport operations run smoothly under the most adverse conditions.



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