

German public service union ensures smooth operation of public transport despite resurgence of coronavirus pandemic

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Under capitalism, profits come first. In order to ensure that workers attend their workplaces despite a surge in coronavirus infections, their children have to go to school, which in turn means public transport has to function. The key role in ensuring that public transport runs on time in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic is played by the country's main public service trade union, Verdi (United Services Union).

In October, thousands of public transport workers went on strike in numerous German cities. The short-term “warning strikes” and protest actions were not only directed against miserable wages and poor working conditions. The danger of infection by the coronavirus due to completely inadequate security measures increasingly became the focus of the dispute.

Verdi tried to dampen the growing anger of workers with a nationwide campaign to accompany its contract negotiations for 2020 (TVN2020). It organized isolated, regionally based strikes and phony forms of ineffectual industrial action. The main aim was to prevent a combined mobilisation of bus, streetcar and metro drivers with municipal and federal public service workers—a total of 2.3 million whose contracts had all been negotiated by Verdi at the same time. First, Verdi agreed a sellout of federal and municipal public service workers, now the union is doing the same for transport workers.

As part of its TVN2020 campaign, Verdi loudly demanded a new national contract for the 87,000 employees of the country's 130 municipal transport companies aimed at ending regional divisions between sections of workers. A nationwide agreement was supposed to define minimum standards regarding vacations, overtime pay and shift allowances. In some states, Verdi also demanded a reduction in working hours and/or shorter shifts.

In the midst of the rapidly developing second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, however, the union did not raise a single demand directed at protecting transport workers from

the risk of infection with COVID-19!

This is not surprising. The murderous strategy of federal and state governments, which have fuelled the pandemic on the basis of facilitating “herd immunity,” is supported by the trade unions against the members they are supposed to represent.

There are now many studies revealing the dangers of infection in public transport where hundreds of thousands of people congregate daily in very confined spaces. A deliberate decision has been made to either refrain from collecting statistical data on drivers who fall ill with COVID-19 or withhold any relevant information from the public.

Last week, Verdi dropped its demand for a uniform nationwide contract and signed separate agreements in the two German states of Saxony and Baden-Württemberg, affecting around 12,000 bus, streetcar and subway drivers.

The contract agreed on October 27 with public transport employers in Saxony will run until the end of 2023. The union's original demand for a reduction in working hours will not come into force until April 1, 2023. According to the agreement, working hours will then be reduced to a 38-hour week with corresponding wage compensation. Holiday entitlement is to increase to 30 days.

Wages are to be frozen for the time being and will only increase in stages by an average of 1.7 percent from April 2021. In light of rising prices and rents, this amounts to a wage cut, which the union has sought to sweeten with a paltry €200 extra payment this year, which it promotes as a “Corona bonus.”

In Baden-Württemberg, Verdi has agreed to a nominal wage increase for 6,400 workers in the municipal public transport sector—a step-by-step increase of 3.2 percent within a period of 28 months—which is in fact an effective wage cut when accounting for the rising cost of living. With the exception of some workshop employees, the agreed Corona bonus amounts to an increase in vacation pay of €120.

Drivers on shift work with 10 years of service are to receive one additional “relief day” per year commencing in 2022.

A separate agreement is still being negotiated for employees in the Rhine-Neckar region, involving the cities of Mannheim, Heidelberg and Ludwigshafen.

In Berlin, due to the particularly tense situation caused by the latest partial lockdown and growing worker discontent, Verdi proposed freezing contract negotiations until next spring. In exchange, the Municipal Employers’ Association (KAV) was to agree the payment of a coronavirus premium.

However, the KAV has refused the proposal, offering only a one-off €500 payment in exchange for a suspension of contract negotiations until June 2021. Union members objected to the employers’ plan and Verdi announced that negotiations would be continued. According to the union’s propaganda, the way is now “clear for the first cornerstones in a forward-looking, fully-fledged collective agreement.”

Similar negotiations are taking place in all other federal states.

This means that any common nationwide uniform wage agreement is dead and buried. On its website Verdi declares: “The VKA [Association of Local Employers’ Associations] refuses to negotiate a nationwide framework collective agreement now, but is prepared to enter into talks with us to reach an agreement on a joint process in the future. However, such a process will take some time.”

Sellouts are now being prepared in one federal state after another. In Saxony, Verdi writes: “In the midst of the pandemic and a pronounced economic crisis, i.e., extremely difficult economic times and also times of long-term uncertainty, a compromise was reached which offers a starting point for the further development of working conditions in public transport.”

Who is the union trying to fool? “In the midst of a pandemic and a pronounced economic crisis, i.e., extremely difficult economic times,” the European Union, German government and state administrations are handing out trillions of euros to major corporations. At the same time pittances are being given to transport workers—and all those key workers who were so loudly “applauded” for their services during the pandemic earlier this year.

Those affected are well aware of this. A driver for Munich’s public transportation company expressed her anger on social media with the manner in which Verdi functionaries patted themselves on the back for “the deal and laughable Corona bonus.” Another colleague, a bus driver in Munich, wrote: “If you calculate the Corona premium over three years, it amounts to 16.67 euros a month! O yay!” Calculated over 12 months, the wage increase in Baden-Württemberg amounts to €50 per month. “But I bet,” the bus driver continued, “we’ll be sold out in the same way in

Bavaria.”

A bus driver for Berlin public transport (BVG) told the WSWS: “The two deals in Saxony and Baden-Württemberg show you can’t expect much from Verdi here in Berlin. One hour less work and only a small wage increase over three years says it all.” Another Berlin bus driver said: “This deal is a slap in the face. It goes beyond belief. How does it help in anyway? After 10 years of service an extra vacation day first in 2023 does not help workers at all. This is no longer a joke.”

Another BVG worker said: “It’s typical Verdi. First of all the union talks big and then does not even conduct a joint struggle. With a real strike many more would immediately join in. But that is exactly what they don’t want. They all sit at the same table and just want peace and quiet.”

As the WSWS warned during the token strikes, “Verdi works very closely with the employers.” As in the past, the strike manoeuvres serve merely to let off steam within the workforce and “prevent independent action ... and thereby ensure that transport is maintained even under adverse and dangerous pandemic conditions.”

Public transport is essential for the business and political ruling elites which are intent on maintaining their stream of profits. Without public transport, students cannot get to school. Without school attendance, parents cannot go to work—the priority for companies and governments at both federal and state level.

Verdi stands staunchly on the side of the employers and government and is ready to sacrifice the wages, working conditions, health and life of the members it claims to represent. Workers can only protect themselves and defend their interests by taking up a struggle against the union. They must form independent rank and file action committees and link up with fellow workers across Europe to prepare a continent-wide general strike.



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