

WISAG airport workers on hunger strike in Frankfurt, Germany: “We will not give up”

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On Wednesday, two dozen workers went on hunger strike at service company WISAG. They are fighting against sackings, wage theft and coronavirus insecurity. WISAG dismissed 230 workers in December, including 31 airport bus drivers who have not been paid since October.

The *Hessenschau*, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Frankfurter Neue Presse* (FNP) and other local and national media are aware of the hunger strike but most of them have refrained from reporting the dispute. This can only be understood as a deliberate kowtowing to WISAG, as the bourgeois press prefers not to offend the powerful corporation.

WISAG owners, Claus Wissner and son Michael, are among the 300 richest families in Germany. They are very well connected and maintain relations with Frankfurt's mayor Peter Feldmann (Social Democratic Party, SPD), the Hesse state Minister of Economics and Transport Tarek Al-Wazir (Greens), the management of Fraport AG that operates Frankfurt airport and the services union Verdi.

But there is another reason for the media blackout: The WISAG workers' hunger strike is an expression of the growing anger and willingness to fight that is spreading among more and more workers. In many companies, employers are using the pandemic to push through job cuts and massive attacks on wages and working conditions. A social storm is building under the surface of society. The ruling class fears that the hunger strike and similar measures of struggle will act like sparks to set off a social explosion and are trying to silence them.

The *World Socialist Web Site* counters this media blackout. It gives a voice to workers in struggle and organises all possible forms of support and solidarity. It illustrates how workers' resistance is developing in many countries and explains why an international strategy and socialist perspective is needed in the struggle against capitalist exploitation.

“Only because we're defending our rights, we don't get paid for 4 months!!!” is written on the cardboard sign of apron (tarmac) bus driver Terzi. He tells the WSWWS how it came to this: “In mid-September, we were told that our

department at WISAG would be shut down and all drivers would have to transfer to a company called Sky City Bus GmbH. This company has only been around since March 2020, but I've been working on the airport apron for 21 years.”

As the workers explained, WISAG is known for constantly pulling new subsidiaries, subcontractors, and service providers out of a hat to cheat workers out of their well-earned rights. The company now has 341 different operations.

Terzi is 44 years old, has a family with two children and has worked for WISAG and its predecessor companies for over 20 years. “Sky City Bus is a trap,” he said. “Anyone who goes there loses all rights and starts again from scratch.” Terzi and most of the drivers were not prepared to do that, and they objected to the spin-off, whereupon WISAG managing director Michael Dietrich threatened them that they would no longer receive wages.

Terzi said, “On October 1, we were at work as usual. Manager Burak Baran gave us the choice of starting at Sky City Bus and boarding the buses—or leaving immediately. He gave us 15 minutes to leave, otherwise he was going to set the police on us. Since then, we have not received any pay. That's almost five months now since the end of October.”

Some workers have tried to get interim support through the jobcentre and at the same time have complained to the labour court. But appointments are postponed and delayed for weeks and months: “The authorities let us starve to death. WISAG had a turnover of €1.9 billion in 2020, but we can't hold out that long.”

“What are we supposed to live on?” Terzi asked. “We are all in the red, and rent, charges and all costs continue.” He says the workers have already held a collection among themselves in solidarity and opened an extra account. “No one else has helped us. From the WISAG side, there is zero. No politician has helped us, and not even the Verdi trade union.”

When they found out that leading Verdi members sat on the WISAG board and all the supervisory boards, they left

the union, he said. “What they are all organising together there is modern slavery.”

Two other colleagues, Riza and Özkan, who worked in coordination, were dismissed on December 17. “Who is going to do our work now? The shift leader has to do all our work himself now, but he is staying quiet, and happy to keep his job,” one said.

As they report, work on the apron is continuing, even though WISAG has been receiving short-time allowances for airport workers paid from the Labour Office for a year now, since the pandemic began. “It would be easy for the jobcentre to check this and demand the money back from WISAG,” one of the workers said.

Adding that throughout the last year, they experienced how the back-breaking work and exploitation on the apron increased: “We all got sick because they don’t use enough people to handle the machines. Many have become ill because WISAG is only using 70 percent of the intended workforce on the machines, in the cargo area and on the belts—everywhere.”

Above all, he said, experienced, qualified workers who have been doing the work for decades and know the job have been laid off. “They were unceremoniously replaced by unskilled contract workers.”

They report that even the boss himself had taken part in loading the machines when staff shortages were too bad. But the workers have to lift the heavy pieces of luggage more than a metre, one after the other, for 300 to 400 pieces. The boss quickly gave up with back pain.

The worker added, “But what is more important is that we all had to qualify, train properly, and we have to undergo further training regularly. We work with dangerous goods, it’s a demanding job. If you don’t know how to load the cargo properly and close the doors correctly, anything can happen in the air. What if a door suddenly opens in flight? The temporary workers who are now at our workstations have been given two days ‘training.’ In the future, every passenger will have to think twice before boarding a plane ...”

Riza is convinced that it was a deliberate decision by WISAG to announce the dismissals so close to Christmas. “That was pure calculation: we wouldn’t be able to file an action for protection against dismissal because all the offices and authorities were closed. It was also an unfavourable time for demonstrations and industrial action. Also, they deliberately wanted to demoralise us.”

He said they did not succeed. “We will not give up,” reads one sign. “We are fighting for jobs and we are not giving up,” Riza also tells us. “It’s not only about getting our own jobs back, it’s not only about the 230 dismissed workers and their families. Workers in Berlin, Hamburg and elsewhere

are also affected.”

With their strike, the workers are also targeting the company’s negligent coronavirus policy. “While we are fighting the pandemic, the employer is trying to throw us out,” one of their banners reads. As long-time worker Benli had told the WSW, there have already been several coronavirus cases at WISAG. “Normally, colleagues should be informed and protected. But here everything is covered up—like the Mafia.”

The WISAG workers’ hunger strike is an important call-out to their colleagues at other airports and to all workers. It is time to become active and take up a common struggle!

The sector union IGL, which is supporting the hunger strike, is limiting itself to making appeals and petitions to the Wisser family and the ministers and capitalists behind them. Such efforts are futile.

What is necessary is to make contact with WISAG workers in Berlin, Hamburg and other locations, as well as with workers in other companies—at Fraport, Lufthansa, etc.—and at all airports in Europe. Everywhere, workers toil under the menace of layoffs and spinoffs, always threatened by even more dangerous coronavirus mutations.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is calling for action committees to be set up, working independently of all trade unions and establishing contact with other workplaces, to prepare for a European-wide general strike.

Every job must be defended unconditionally! As long as the pandemic rages, only essential work should be carried out, with full wages paid to all who cannot work because of the danger of coronavirus. Workers’ lives and rights stand higher than the profit interests of the corporations.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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