

WISAG ground workers at Frankfurt Airport call for expanded struggle

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The WISAG ground workers maintained their hunger strike at Terminal 1 of Rhein-Main Airport for eight days before they had to break it off on the evening of March 3. Before that several hunger strikers had collapsed since Sunday. The workers have temporarily suspended their action, "exclusively for health reasons," as they say.

The ground workers are fighting against 230 dismissals, increasing exploitation and low wages. They have not capitulated, but on the contrary want to expand the struggle. In a courageous appeal published today by the *World Socialist Web Site*, they say: "Workers everywhere are facing very similar problems. We must fight together! (...) We, the workers, are 'essential', without us society does not function. We say: Life before profits! The health and well-being of the workers are more important than the profits of the financial oligarchy."

The industrial action at WISAG illustrates the problems facing workers in microcosm. Thirty years ago, if you had a job at the airport, you were set for life. Such jobs were part of the public sector, reasonably paid, with guaranteed employment and a company pension, Christmas bonuses and holiday pay. Job security was a priority in every respect. Today, the dream job has turned into a nightmare.

WISAG is just one of the companies using the pandemic as an excuse to systematically cut jobs at the airport and destroy workers' rights. At airport operator Fraport, 4,000 jobs out of 22,000 in Frankfurt am Main are to be cut, allegedly "due to coronavirus." At Lufthansa, 30,000 jobs have already been destroyed worldwide, and another 10,000 are to follow. Lufthansa has received 9 billion euros in "coronavirus aid" from the state. WISAG itself has already laid off 350 ground workers in Berlin last summer.

The pandemic is only the trigger. Corporations and banks are using the opportunity to implement long desired plans for destroying jobs and important achievements and get rid of workers with seniority. This is exemplified by

WISAG.

In 2018, the WISAG holding company used a court case to boot out the previous ground services provider, Acciona, at Frankfurt Airport and take over its concessions. Company owner Claus Wisser personally guaranteed all employees at the time that their rights would be fully protected as part of the transfer of operations. "At the time, we didn't know that it was all a sham," says Rene, one of the hunger strikers, "and that WISAG was just trying to prevent possible strikes."

Almost immediately after the takeover, the company started to put pressure on older workers in order to get rid of them. Often they were forced to take on jobs that were not even in their contract. The teams working at the aircraft were understaffed and loadmasters were forced to work as loaders and baggage drivers, for example. Those who resisted were threatened with dismissal.

The tone was set by Michael Dietrich, the newly hired managing director, "a man who walks over corpses," as WISAG workers say. What Dietrich says is the law, whether it complies with regulations and safety rules or not. Temporary workers are put to work on planes without professional training. One worker reports, "As a result, there were many accidents and damage. One worker was even blown 4 to 5 metres in the air because he got behind a running engine. But Fraport and WISAG covered it all up."

The pandemic opened up previously undreamed-of possibilities for management. Immediately, WISAG officially introduced short-time working, which means workers' wages are paid by the employment office, but only at 60 percent, so they suffer considerable wage losses.

At the same time, however, operations in the cargo division continue. While passenger numbers have plummeted, there is intense activity around the clock between the planes and cargo halls. The transport of food,

relief supplies, medicines etc. has not stopped. After all, supply chains must be maintained to provide parts to industries that have not been closed down during the whole pandemic.

As a result, some have had to work overtime. “People worked 160 to 200 hours,” says Benli, a worker whom WISAG dismissed after 37 years’ service. “In fact, 40 to 50 planes were dispatched every day. And now, in March, there are significantly more.”

Even when colleagues fell ill with coronavirus, not even their closest team members were sent into quarantine. The company’s response was cover-up instead of contact tracing—a situation that can lead to disaster in an outbreak with a highly contagious strain of the virus.

Then on December 17, just a week before Christmas, a total of 230 workers received notice of dismissal “in the most brazen way.” They were offered about 4,000 Euros severance pay for 20 years’ service. Workers were coerced into signing severance agreements and re-employed at another WISAG subsidiary at minimum wage, giving up all their acquired rights, with a fixed-term contract and on the condition that they could be deployed throughout Germany. Still other workers had their terms and conditions changed.

Thirty-one airport bus drivers were forced to switch to the brand new subsidiary City Bus. This company is one of more than 300 corporate constructs that WISAG has set up, hidden or open, to depress wages and break contracts. Those who refused the offer were dismissed and their pay stopped from October 2020. This is what the “unavoidable dismissals” look like, about which company chief Michael C. Wisser wrote in his most recent letter to his “dear colleagues.” The sackings were “by no means easy,” he said. The trade union Verdi also claims to have known “nothing at all” until the end of January.

The hunger strike has also shone a glaring light on the role of the so-called “workers’ representatives”—the large service union Verdi and the works council. As the hunger strikers’ statement says: “Our struggle has not been supported by Verdi officials, nor by the works council.”

That is why more than a hundred WISAG workers have left Verdi and become members of the smaller sectoral union IG Luftfahrt (IGL). However, the latter shares the same perspective as Verdi, with which it professes to want to cooperate. The IGL is trying to use the workers’ protests to put pressure on the Wisser family, one of the 300 richest families in Germany, to convince them of the need for a “crisis collective agreement”—the cost of which will ultimately have to be paid by the workers!

The workers are rightly turning to their colleagues at other WISAG sites, at airports and throughout the industry, because they are their only reliable allies. The increasingly brutal attacks can only be repelled and reversed through an independently organised joint struggle.

What is needed is a fight at the political level. As one WISAG worker wrote on Facebook, “Since there are probably Verdi people on the WISAG board, and Claus Wisser has also donated a lot of money to parties, especially to the SPD [Social Democrats], the politicians are dumb and blind as far as what’s happening at WISAG is concerned.”

The WISAG workers were on hunger strike for eight days, but no parliamentary group in the Hesse state parliament, in Frankfurt City Hall or in the Bundestag (federal parliament) even looked at what was happening. The Wisser family is well networked and connected with high-ranking politicians, such as the Hesse state Minister of Economics and Transport, Tarek Al-Wazir (Green Party), who actively promoted WISAG’s entry into the airport.

The local and regional press has kept silent about the hunger strike. Apart from very brief reports once in the *Bild* and twice on broadcaster RTL, there was literally nothing, neither in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the FNP, the *Offenbach Post*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* nor in the *Hessenschau*. This clearly shows that the freedom of the press is really degenerating into mere court reporting in the service of the capitalists.

Workers need their own party, their own media, and their own independent workplace action committees. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its online platform, the *World Socialist Web Site*, have supported the struggle of the WISAG ground workers from the beginning, publicising it through the network of independent action committees and mobilising international solidarity.



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