

Industrial action at WISAG: How the European Union deregulated ground services

Marianne Arens
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For almost three months, a group of ground workers at Frankfurt Airport have been fighting against their dismissal by service provider WISAG. The media remained virtually silent about an eight-day hunger strike at the end of February. Only on 5 March, after the end of the hunger strike, did the first reports about it appear in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* or the *Frankfurter Neue Presse*.

Michael Dietrich, managing director of WISAG Ground Service Frankfurt, called the hunger strike “excessive and irresponsible,” while the dismissal of the workers was “legitimate” and “necessary,” even though they have been working at Frankfurt Airport for 10 times as long as WISAG itself. According to Dietrich, their hunger strike was “completely disproportionate” and “not a suitable means” to stop “a company from acting in a fundamentally lawful way.”

A “fundamentally lawful” action? That seems absurd. The company is throwing the 230 most experienced ground workers out the door to cut labour costs. In its “corporate direction and strategy” of August 11, 2020, management announced that in the future it intends to employ only 60 percent of the workforce at the airport permanently. To compensate, it wants to continue to rely on temporary workers in its two ground services companies, WISAG Ground Services (WGS) and WISAG Passage Services (WPaS), even after the end of the pandemic. It is precisely this strategy that is now being mercilessly enforced.

The millionaire Wisser family, who own WISAG, has the governing parties and the European Union behind them. The EU has systematically pushed forward the deregulation of air transport since the 1980s and of ground services since the mid-1990s. It has issued directives that allow airlines and their service providers to ruthlessly exploit workers in the name of “free

competition.”

Internationally, the assault on airport workers began in August 1981 in the USA, when 14,000 air traffic controllers went on strike against low wages and intolerable working conditions. President Ronald Reagan decided to make an example of them, firing all the air traffic controllers and breaking up their union, PATCO. The reactionary Reagan was able to do this because the AFL-CIO isolated the air traffic controllers and sabotaged their strike.

After that, there was no stopping the attacks. All air traffic was deregulated. Whereas a few large airlines, mostly state-owned in Europe, had dominated air traffic, offering relatively well-paid and secure jobs, it was now the turn of the low-cost airlines. Their imagination knew no bounds when it came to lowering wages and worsening working conditions.

The European Union followed suit. With the adoption of the “Single European Act” in 1986, a process began that broke up the old structures and gradually produced a “competitive single European aviation market.” The hour of the O’Leary family, owner of ultra-low cost Irish airline Ryanair, had struck. Competition was established on the backs of the workers. What was once the dream job—pilots and cabin crew—became a nightmare.

The state-owned airlines did the same. Many could not withstand the competitive pressure and were broken up. Others, like Lufthansa, founded their own low-cost airlines.

In 1996, it was also the turn of ground services. These had previously been run by the airport companies themselves in Europe, which meant that there were uniform contracts with decent pay and social benefits.

But the EU ruled that this was an unjustified “monopoly” for the airport operators and that they

should allow in private competitors. On October 15, 1996, the European Council adopted Directive 96/67/EC, which guaranteed independent third-party handlers free market access in ground handling services. This has been expanded several times since then. In the course of deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation, airports were obliged to consider the cheapest providers on the market.

The interests of the workers fell by the wayside. Through the relaxation of collective bargaining, their rights, wages, achievements, and safeguards were liquidated step by step. At the airports, new subsidiaries and subcontractors kept moving in and putting the workers under pressure.

With their “Agenda 2010” and Hartz “reforms” which attacked welfare and labour rights, the Social Democratic Party-Green Party government in Germany from 1998 to 2005 under Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer ensured that all legal obstacles were removed that stood in the way of the unrestricted use of temporary staff, agency working and other forms of low-wage employment.

And what did the trade unions do? The answer is simple: they were actively involved in the destruction of their members’ jobs and rights. Not only did they refrain from any resistance to protect workers’ wages and rights, but the main unions in Germany, such as Verdi, actively participated in Brussels and Berlin to create a new low-wage market.

Isolde Kunkel-Weber from the Verdi executive board, for example, sat on the commission that worked out the so-called Hartz “reforms” under the leadership of VW personnel director Peter Hartz. Kunkel was also president of the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) in Brussels, representing 8 million members in 49 countries, from 2016 to 2019. The EPSU was actively involved in the drafting of the neo-liberal European Single Market.

At airports, as in manufacturing, the unions signed off on one new collective agreement after another which accepted the use of subcontractors, labour brokers and temporary agencies, destroying the principle of the labour movement: “equal pay for equal work.” For example, the seven largest German trade unions concluded special collective bargaining agreements with employers’ organisations representing German temp agencies such as iGZ and BZA.

Well-connected business oligarchs like Wisser were able to profit from the laws passed by their party colleagues in various political bodies. It was no coincidence that Hesse’s state Minister of Economics and Transport, Tarek Al-Wazir (Green Party), explicitly advocated that the WISAG Group should be awarded the contract for ground services at Frankfurt Airport in 2018.

Claus Wisser’s senior SPD party colleague, the recently deceased Wolfgang Clement, was a key figure in pushing through “Agenda 2010.” He was Schröder’s “super minister” for economics and finance from 2002 and was central to the SPD-Green government’s introduction of massive tax cuts for the rich and corporations while lowering workers’ pensions and creating the new low-wage sector. Together with Claus Wisser, Wolfgang Clement sat for years on the supervisory board of the notorious real estate company Deutsche Wohnen, which, with the help of the SPD-Left Party state executive in Berlin, bought up former social housing for a song, privatised it and massively raised rents.

It is little wonder that every year at the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) New Year reception, the Frankfurt DGB chair welcomes Claus Wisser by name as guest of honour and representative of the Frankfurt employers.

These circumstances clearly show the background against which the WISAG workers took up their struggle. It makes clear why the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) insists that the workers must build rank-and-file committees that can act completely independently of the establishment parties and the trade unions. It becomes clear that they need an international strategy and to make contact with their brothers and sisters in other countries.



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