

Germany: The WISAG business model—spinoffs, layoffs and wage cuts

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For three months, hundreds of ground workers at Germany's Frankfurt Airport have been carrying out industrial action against the WISAG company. Their struggle has shed light on the manner in which corporations, with the assistance of the establishment political parties and the trade unions, are using the coronavirus pandemic to slash jobs and wages and attack previous social gains made by workers.

WISAG dismissed some 200 ground workers and 31 airport bus drivers shortly before Christmas and has since laid off an additional 30 workers, including some with severe disabilities. The company has cited "operational reasons" for the sackings.

Those affected are experienced airport staff, who have carried out intensive labour at low wages for decades, performing back-breaking jobs under conditions of relentless time pressure and constant engine noise to the detriment of their health.

This is not the first time that WISAG has sought to destroy workers' rights, and the company is not alone in making use of the coronavirus pandemic to push through long-planned attacks on its employees.

On the contrary, WISAG's hire-and-fire policy is increasingly becoming a standard business model. For years, the company has used a variety of legal tricks to squeeze its labour costs.

The company operates in a range of business sectors, including building cleaning, facility management, security and airport ground services. It has a history of setting up shell companies to facilitate the dismissal of employees and hiring of new ones with fewer benefits and protections against wage-cutting and speedup. Any worker who resists is fired.

When in 2008 WISAG took over airport ground services in Berlin, which until then had been managed by Lufthansa and the state-owned Berlin-Brandenburg airport company, then-Brandenburg State Premier Matthias Platzeck of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) praised owner Claus Wisser, saying, "WISAG is a company that treats its employees responsibly and well."

The opposite was the case. Wisser split the running of ground services among three subcontractors. Already by 2014 the check-in operation, with 220 employees, had been closed. Those who did not want to lose their jobs were forced to switch to a new and even more exploitative company.

In the summer of 2020, Berlin's WISAG operations were taken into voluntary insolvency in order to open a new company, with worse conditions for the employees, at the new BER airport. At least 350 workers lost their jobs, many of whom were replaced by temporary workers.

A similar attack has now been carried out in Frankfurt. There, ground workers operating under a permanent contract at WISAG Ground Service Frankfurt were dismissed, only to receive a new contract offer from WISAG Ground Service Hamburg. The company is demanding that they sign a statement that "there was no previous employment relationship with WISAG," and that WISAG may employ them "permanently at another place of work within Germany." Following the example of victimized WISAG bus drivers, any Frankfurt workers who resist are punished with a pay cut.

In all this, WISAG relies on the lack of any effective representation of the workers' interests. It can unreservedly count on Verdi, the largest service union at the airport, which sits on all of the company supervisory boards and is involved in their mafia-like plans.

The leading Verdi personnel are recruited from the same political parties—the SPD, the Greens the Left Party—that are responsible for the deregulation of recent decades. At the airport, Verdi explicitly puts the economic interests of the German aviation corporations above the vital needs of the workers and opposes collective action in defence of the workers.

"Verdi is a waste of time" is the conclusion of dismissed WISAG worker Aptoukassim Terzi, who described his situation in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. He is one of the bus drivers who have not received a wage from WISAG since October, more than five months ago, because he refused to transfer to the new shell company.

Terzi described the pressure the company put on the bus drivers to switch to the new temporary employment agency, saying, "Managing Director Michael Dietrich threatened us that he would stop paying our wages if we didn't move over to the new company."

The new contracting company, Sky City Bus GmbH, had only been founded in March 2020, apparently by WISAG itself. "The managing director of Sky City Bus is a colleague who had

also worked for WISAG until then,” Terzi said.

Management took over the handling of aircraft at the airport in 2018. Terzi said of the move, “They took us over from Acciona at that time, with all our rights. Now, all of a sudden, they have a reason to terminate us because of coronavirus.”

He questioned the legality of the manoeuvre, but noted, “The managing director says, ‘I’m allowed to do this, and I will do this.’ And that’s what he did.”

Terzi had worked at the airport for 21 years. He eventually took part in the hunger strike along with other affected workers that lasted from February 24 to March 3. “So far, nothing is moving, nobody is doing anything,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

He said that he had “grown old at the airport,” adding, “Twenty-one years—that’s half my life. And now, suddenly, we face being thrown out.”

In the interview, recorded at a rally in front of the Hesse State Assembly in Wiesbaden, Terzi noted that the workers had already turned to the labour court, without any result. “We are trying to get our rights from somewhere, including from the politicians here,” he said. But “none of the politicians has helped us so far.”

Terzi’s two sons attended the rally to demonstrate their support for their father and his colleagues. Hasan and Emre said they thought the arbitrary dismissals were “not okay, especially in the midst of the coronavirus, when everyone should stick together.”

They continued, “People are cold-shouldered without considering whether they have families and children and how they are supposed to feed them. And this after all the time they have invested in the company—not only our father, but many others who have also been there for well over 20 years. They built the company at the airport, and now they are told they are just worthless.”

Hasan pointed out that WISAG had accepted coronavirus aid from the state, “but yet it is now laying off workers. People are being put out on the street.”

Both brothers have spoken to their colleagues about situation. Emre is training to be an automotive technician.

Hasan, who is an application developer, said, “At first, my colleagues thought what is happening here was impossible. It is an affront, they say. I have colleagues who didn’t believe me at first. They asked, ‘Don’t you have a union? They can’t just do that after more than 20 years.’ But the unions didn’t help. The workers were on their own.”

Emre reported, “When I told my colleagues that my father and his colleagues had not been paid for months, it was a shock to many. ‘You can’t do that, especially in times of coronavirus.’ they said.”

The hunger strike was an extreme experience for the family, he said. “We were afraid for our father. It’s no fun not eating for days and only drinking water. We never thought it would come to this, that a hunger strike would be necessary, and that

my father would have to put his life on the line.”

In particular, their mother was “extremely worried.” He said, “But it was also hard for me. I was there every day checking on how they were doing.”

What was reassuring for the two brothers was the fact that “many fellow workers went there and they were not alone.” The brothers pointed out that the WISAG workers did not back down.

Emre said, “These workers have shown that if you stick together and don’t give in, you can achieve something. ... People must come out of their caves. At the beginning of the hunger strike, I thought my father was all alone, but these workers have really grown.”

Since the demonstration in Wiesbaden, however, the struggle has come to a crossroads. As the WSWS has stressed, the struggle must not be left to the sectional union IGL.

In Wiesbaden, the IGL proved that it places the fate of the airport ground workers in the hands of the politicians from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Greens, the SPD and the Left Party. It has allowed representatives of all these parties, who are responsible for the outrageous conditions at the airport, to completely dominate the discussion.

The IGL does not represent a different perspective than that of Verdi and seeks cooperation with the latter. That is why it is currently preparing a new rally in front of Verdi headquarters in Frankfurt, where the same union from which most of the WISAG workers had just resigned will again be called on to take action.

Workers must organise themselves independently of the trade unions in rank-and-file action committees, which do not turn to the bourgeois parties, but to the workers at other workplaces because they face the same problems. To that end, the WSWS calls for all workers to make contact with the network of action committees being developed for the fight for secure jobs.



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