

Germany: Airport ground workers stage protest at Verdi trade union headquarters

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The airport ground workers who demonstrated in front of the Verdi trade union headquarters in Frankfurt am Main last Tuesday carried a funeral wreath. The group of workers were arbitrarily dismissed by the company, WISAG, three months ago.

At Tuesday's protest the workers loudly accused the Verdi service workers trade union of abandoning them. "We are fighting for our jobs and our rights—but where was Verdi all this time?" cried out Riza Kodak, a spokesperson for the group.

The Verdi secretary responsible for the workers sent his apologies and refused to meet with them. Not surprisingly, the union had nothing to say to the WISAG workers.

The funeral wreath is a fitting symbol for the trade unions as a whole in this day and age. Unions such as Verdi, IG Metall and others are no longer in the land of the living when it comes to defending the interests of the working class. The unions stand with both feet on the side of the corporations and defend the capitalist profit system. They are paid handsomely by the companies for assuming their roles as company police in the factories and directing workers' opposition to wage cuts and dismissals into the dead end of toothless protests. The huge IG Metall tower alongside the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) building on the banks of the Main River in the finance centre of Frankfurt is emblematic of the role of the trade unions.

The WISAG workers have suffered personally from the vile role played by Verdi and have every right to turn their backs on the union. However, it is not enough to break with the organisation and then seek to build another union. To truly defend jobs and wages, workers have to break with the entire perspective of the trade unions, which advocate mass layoffs and wage cuts in order to advance the profits and competitiveness of the

company that employs them. They effectively degrade workers to the level of supplicants.

This is particularly evident at WISAG. Some of the workers switched to the sectional IGL, hoping that the smaller union would better represent their interests than the Verdi bureaucrats. For its part the IGL leadership has made abundantly clear that it will not oppose Verdi's cronyism, but instead seeks to replace Verdi as the company's union guard dog. The IGL's problem is that the airline companies have so far refused to take up the union's offer.

The deputy leader of the IGL, Daniel Wollenberg, had already made clear in a video broadcast on January 29 that his union would be prepared to impose punitive sanctions on airline workers if WISAG were prepared to accept IGL as negotiating partner.

"We are not dreamers. We see what's going on at the moment. The crisis is getting worse and we all don't know where the journey is going," Wollenberg explained, adding that short-time work could be extended and layoffs eventually replaced by "temporary part-time contracts." In order to impose such measures, WISAG would have to talk to the IGL executive. "We would be willing to do that," Wollenberg said.

"Temporary part-time contracts"—this is a worse alternative to the miserable fixed-term contracts WISAG offered some workers back in December to replace their previous contracts. Workers quite rightly rejected them outright at the time.

The IGL never seriously supported the hunger strike and protests of the WISAG workers. It did, however, send futile pleading letters to Economics Minister Peter Altmaier (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD). At the same time it refrained from informing its

members in other companies or WISAG workers at other locations about their colleagues' industrial action. It also refused to organise any solidarity declarations or actions by other workers. The truth is that the union actively opposes those seeking to wage a real struggle.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) publicised the WISAG workers' hunger strike internationally and won the support of workers all around the world, IGL representatives excluded those expressing solidarity and SGP members from the Facebook group set up by the workers themselves.

One IGL member, who made it known on Facebook that he approved of the xenophobic, far-right Alternative for Germany grouping in the state of Hesse, threatened those who were critical of the IGL, stating that their presence at protest actions was not desired.

The sabotaging of the WISAG workers struggle by the IGL and the right-wing elements associated with it is no coincidence. It is the direct consequence of a trade union perspective. The globalisation of production has stripped away the basis for reforms based on a nationally organised labour market.

In the past the unions were able to achieve temporary improvements for workers by applying pressure to capitalist companies and the political parties in power. Today the reverse is the case. The unions put pressure on workers in order to maintain the competitiveness of their "own" companies on the world market.

This tendency has now come to a head with the pandemic. Big companies are raking in record profits having received billions of taxpayer euros at the expense of workers' health. At the same time, they are using the terrible consequences of the pandemic as an excuse to carry out long-planned company restructuring, wage cuts and layoffs with the unions implementing the company strategy against the workers.

Workers can only defend themselves against this broad offensive by waging a common struggle. What is necessary is exactly what the unions are seeking to suppress at all costs: the international mobilisation of workers in a European general strike against the policies of mass infections, mass layoffs and wage robbery.

Such a mobilisation must commence with a socialist perspective. The rights of workers and their basic

interests stand above the profit interests of the oligarchs, shareholders and speculators. The struggle against the pandemic requires a democratically planned economy serving the needs of the broad masses of the population. This necessity has been confirmed time and time again in the past few months with its attendant terrible death toll.

Under these conditions the struggle by WISAG workers gains great importance. It has inspired workers all over the world because it represented a break from the union straitjacket. The workers' slogan "Today us—tomorrow you!" is correct. It is not addressed to politicians and union bureaucrats, but rather to fellow airport workers and all the sections of the working class.

The key issue now is to extend the struggle and make it the starting point of a broad mobilisation. This is the only realistic way to defend jobs and requires a break not only with Verdi but also with the IGL leadership, which is offering its services to the bosses as the more effective policeman. Instead of protesting at the union offices, WISAG workers should approach Opel auto workers in Rüsselsheim, who are also threatened with layoffs, and commence a common struggle.

We need an open and uncensored discussion about these issues. I therefore call on all colleagues at WISAG to join the Facebook page of the Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces and prepare to discuss the basis for a genuinely democratic action committee at WISAG.



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