

Frankfurt Airport ground workers' struggle at the crossroads

Statement of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party of Germany)
10 April 2021

With their courageous fight against the WISAG corporation, the ground workers at Frankfurt Airport have already achieved something important: They have torn the mask off the media, the establishment parties, and the Verdi trade union and revealed social conditions as they are.

The politicians and union officials, who endlessly prattle about “social partnership” and “social market economy,” have stabbed the sacked workers in the back and thrown their weight behind the WISAG corporation, which is unscrupulously using the coronavirus pandemic to lay off qualified employees and replace them with poorly paid temporary workers, who are subject to be sacked at any time.

WISAG laid off some 200 ground workers and 31 bus drivers at Frankfurt Airport shortly before Christmas. Many of those who were fired are experienced airport employees who carried out strenuous labour at low wages for decades. The back-breaking nature of their work was compounded by relentless time pressure and constant engine noise, with detrimental consequences for their health.

To the surprise of the corporation, the workers responded to their sacking not only with shock but also with a readiness to fight. They refused to simply accept their dismissal and decided to resist. They organized numerous demonstrations and rallies. At the end of February, two dozen of the sacked workers went on hunger strike for eight days in Frankfurt Airport's Terminal One.

It quickly became clear that neither WISAG nor the politicians of the governing parties would be won over by protest. The media, which is in cahoots with the corporations and the establishment parties, barely reported the industrial dispute. The same pro-corporate media that dispatch droves of journalists and photographers to the scene as soon as a right-wing coronavirus denier stands up in a marketplace with a cardboard sign, kept silent about the weeklong hunger strike at Germany's largest airport.

There is a simple reason for the media blackout: The Frankfurt ground workers stand for millions of workers all over the world who face similar attacks. To prevent their struggle from spreading, they must be isolated and silenced.

A small layer of the superrich is using the pandemic to further enrich itself at the expense of the working class. While coffins pile up in morgues, stock prices hit new highs. The number of billionaires worldwide rose more in the pandemic year of 2020 than in any previous year. Their ranks increased from 2,115 to 2,775. Their collective wealth surged by more than 60 percent,

from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion. The latter sum is more than three times Germany's annual gross domestic product.

The human cost of this orgy of enrichment is borne by the working class. Nearly three million people have died worldwide because governments refuse to close businesses and schools to stop the spread of the deadly virus. The corporate elites and the governments they control walk over dead bodies to keep profits flowing. In aviation, the auto industry and numerous other sectors, CEOs are implementing longstanding plans to cut jobs and lower wages.

A huge storm of resistance is developing. Protests and strikes are growing all over the world, even though they are often isolated and silenced. This is the reason for the hostility of the establishment parties, the media and the unions to the WISAG ground workers. They fear that their struggle will develop into a conflagration they can no longer control.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) has organized international support for the struggle of the ground workers, revealing the enormous potential for struggle that exists in the international working class. It has organized messages of solidarity from bus drivers in Berlin and London, from American, British and Turkish teachers, and from education action committees in several countries. The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the industrial action at Frankfurt Airport to readers around the world in several languages.

The SGP has called for the building of an international network of independent action committees. It has stressed that the struggle against layoffs requires a socialist programme that places workers' needs above capitalist profit.

While many ground workers agree with this, the Industrial Union of Air Transport (IGL) has reacted with open hostility. Its officials prevented SGP representatives from speaking at ground workers' rallies and agitated against the party on social media. They issued the slogan: “No politics!”

After it broke with the large service workers' union Verdi, the IGL sectoral union offered itself to the struggling ground workers as a “saviour in time of need.”

Verdi does not represent the interests of workers. It is a corporatist apparatus that sits on the supervisory boards of airport operator Fraport and Lufthansa and works closely with management in planning layoffs and wage cuts. During a rally, the ground workers demonstratively laid a black wreath in front of Verdi headquarters.

But IGL, which was formed in 2015, advocates the same perspective as Verdi. It is trying to use the struggle of the WISAG workers to demonstrate its reliability as a “collective bargaining partner” of the corporations. It promotes itself with the slogan “Experience social partnership in aviation once again.”

It is not possible to represent the interests of the workers and at the same time cultivate “social partnership” with WISAG, Fraport and Lufthansa.

Already a year ago, at Lufthansa, the IGL joined with Verdi and other unions in signing a declaration of loyalty to CEO Carsten Spohr, promising its “support for all measures necessary to stabilize our Group in these difficult times.” The declaration, which bears the signatures of IGL board members Daniel Wollenberg and Thorsten Spreu, has encouraged the Lufthansa board to launch its biggest attack ever on the workforce. This year, the group is cutting labour costs for its own ground staff, colleagues of the WISAG workers, by 50 percent.

The IGL rejects international solidarity among workers. At the Frankfurt Airport, it calls for further action under the nationalist slogan, “Strengthen Germany as a business location.” Instead of uniting workers of all countries, it plays off workers in Germany against their international brothers and sisters, who are all fighting the same global corporations.

Equally reactionary is its slogan of “no politics.” In reality, this means subordinating workers to the politics of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the Greens and all of the other government parties with which the IGL collaborates. But from day one it became clear that the ground workers could achieve their goals only by fighting against the policies of these parties.

The labour laws on which WISAG is basing its attack on the ground workers were drafted by the SPD and the Greens under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. They served as the basis for creating a huge low-wage sector in Germany. WISAG boss Claus Wisser, a member of the SPD for more than 60 years, has become rich as a result. He has used the corrupt networks in the SPD and the trade unions to build a corporate empire that thrives on the brutal exploitation in the low-wage sector.

In addition to airport ground services, WISAG is active in the areas of building cleaning, facility management and security. The group uses bogus, temporary and subsidiary companies to lay off employees and then rehire them on worse terms. Anyone who resists is punished by being banned from the company, having his wages cut and being fired.

In Berlin, where WISAG took over ground services at the city’s airports in 2008, with the support of the SPD and the Left Party, the company split the services up between three subcontractors, laid off numerous workers and then forced them to transfer to a newly established company on much worse terms. In the summer of 2020, Berlin-based WISAG went bankrupt, paving the way for the setting up of a new company at the new BER airport—also on worse terms and at the cost of at least 350 jobs. Many employees were replaced by temporary workers.

For the owners of WISAG, the Wisser family, it was worth it. With a fortune of €450 million, they were ranked 281st on *Manager Magazin*’s list of the richest Germans in 2020. (Other

sources cite a sum twice as high.) In Hesse, Claus Wisser is celebrated as a patron of the arts and showered with state medals and prizes. He is also a regular guest of honour at the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) annual reception.

The CDU and the Greens, who form the state government in Hesse and co-govern in the city of Frankfurt, have a direct interest in increasing the profits of Fraport, the airport operator, at the expense of the workers. Fraport is majority-owned by Hesse and Frankfurt. In 2017, Green Party Economy and Transport Minister Tarek Al-Wazir personally lobbied for the concessions at the airport to be transferred from Spain’s Acciona to WISAG.

WISAG workers are at a crossroads: Either they follow the IGL and allow themselves to be reduced to impotent supplicants to WISAG, the state government and the capitalist parties, which is the sure path to sellout and defeat.

Or they extend their struggle, turn to their colleagues at other airports, in the auto industry, in hospitals and throughout the international working class and fight for their support. This requires perseverance and determination, but it is the only way to succeed.

To do this, they must organize themselves into an independent action committee, which will take charge of defending jobs, building contacts with other workers and preparing for a political struggle against capitalism, its parties and the government. In this fight the SGP will give the workers all possible support.

Such a struggle requires a socialist programme. Not a single social problem can be solved today without expropriating the vast fortunes of the financial oligarchy and transforming society to serve social needs rather than private profit. This applies as much to defending jobs, incomes and social gains as it does to curbing the coronavirus pandemic, which primarily affects workers and the poor.

The SGP is running in the federal election in the autumn to fight for an international socialist programme and to build the new socialist leadership in the working class.



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