

Germany: WISAG workers hold rally at Frankfurt Airport

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Sacked WISAG workers continued their struggle on April 8 by marching through Terminal 1 of Frankfurt Airport, banging drums and blowing whistles. Last Christmas the service company WISAG dismissed 230 airport ground workers, some of whom have decades of experience, and replaced them with temporary workers. The company also withheld the wages for six months of 30 bus drivers, who had refused to be transferred to a newly established subsidiary holding.

One WISAG worker told the WSWS, “The employment office offered me a job at the airport through a personnel service provider, where I would go home with an hourly wage of 10.35 euros gross. That would be a fraction of what I previously earned.”

This worker had worked at the airport for 37 years before his dismissal. It was a mystery to him, he continued, how one could survive in the Rhine-Main area on such a low hourly wage. He has a family like most of his colleagues, and his debts were considerable following a year of short-time working. “And the labour court is taking its time,” added another WISAG worker. After the initial, short conciliation talks in March, the labour court has scheduled a further hearing date on the worker’s complaint for June.

Last Thursday’s march through the airport was the 14th demonstration by the workers, who had held a hunger strike for eight days at the end of February. The April 8 rally met with the support and sympathy of other airport workers, many of whom face the same problems.

The airport operator, Fraport, wants to cut up to 6,000 jobs. The first move by Fraport was to lay off temporary and fixed-term workers. Now the company, which used to be in public ownership, is seeking to get rid of its long-serving employees because they still benefit from long-standing contract agreements. Only 1,600 older Fraport employees have accepted a severance offer, however. For some time now, the company has also wanted to

outsource whole areas of ground handling services, whose staff are threatened with the same fate as the WISAG workers.

As for Germany’s main airline, Lufthansa, the company is in the process of cutting up to 50,000 jobs, with 30,000 of these jobs already having been cut, mainly abroad. Last year Lufthansa also sold off its catering subsidiary LSG SkyChefs. The workforce, which has already been on short-time working for a year, has also been deprived of holiday and Christmas bonuses until the end of 2021 as part of a “crisis package.” As a result, the workers in LH ground services, LH technical services and LH cargo will have to forfeit €200 million so the company can halve its wage costs.

At the same time, the Lufthansa Group wants to pay bonuses to its executives yet again this year, although it has already received several billion euros in coronavirus aid from taxpayers’ money. Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr, for example, pocketed over €4 million in 2017, 85 times the average employee’s salary.

The pandemic has enormously intensified social polarisation. While a narrow upper-class elite enriches itself without limits, the working class is paying the price in the form of COVID-19 illnesses and deaths, along with mass layoffs and wage cuts. In German air transport alone, 60,000 jobs are currently under acute threat, according to an announcement by the German Air Transport Association (BDL) at the end of January. Aviation companies are in the process of destroying almost one in four of the approximately 255,000 jobs in the German air industry.

WISAG demonstrated in unscrupulous fashion how big corporations can use the pandemic to lay off qualified workers and replace them with poorly paid temporary workers, who can be sacked at will. Airports expect to fully regain or even exceed pre-pandemic passenger levels by 2025 at the latest, and in Frankfurt, Fraport plans to

reopen Terminal 2 as early as this summer. Cargo traffic has remained stable during the pandemic and is currently booming. Nevertheless, big companies are using the pandemic as a pretext to implement long-planned attacks on workers and generally squeeze staff costs.

In this respect, the Frankfurt ground staff who have opposed these attacks represent millions of workers around the world. Everywhere they demonstrate, passing motorists show their approval and sympathy by honking their horns and, at the airport, colleagues and passersby stop and give a thumbs up to express their support.

The struggle conducted by the WISAG workers makes clear that the building of an independent action committee for safe jobs is both necessary and possible at airports. The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) has been proposing such a policy for a considerable time based on the principle that workers' lives and social conditions are more important than capitalist profits. The SGP is building a network of such action committees to enable workers to fight for safe workplaces and safe schools during the coronavirus pandemic.

These action committees must function independently of all the established political parties and, above all, independently of the trade unions. The services union Verdi, the in-house union at the airport, functions more and more openly as an agency of German big business and has declared company competitiveness to be its highest principle.

At airports, Verdi executives sit on all the supervisory boards of WISAG, Lufthansa and Fraport. Together with management, they are pressing ahead with a joint offensive against the workers. At Lufthansa, together with Ufo and the Cockpit unions, Verdi has agreed to the company's crisis package, which workers are paying for now with their incomes and many with their livelihoods.

As for the WISAG workers, Verdi has completely abandoned them. Quite correctly the workers recently laid a funeral wreath in front of Verdi headquarters.

The smaller, sectional union IGL, to which the WISAG workers have turned, shares the political programme as Verdi. The IGL has replaced the original motto of the WISAG workers, "Today us—tomorrow you," with limited right-wing slogans. The union called for a rally at the airport under the slogan "Thursdays for Aviation," but now its slogan reads "Aviation is our life. Aviation secures jobs, connects people, and strengthens Germany as a business location." Is this what the WISAG workers set out to fight for?

The IGL leadership tells workers that their fate depends

on the Hesse state government, a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Greens. IGL deputy leader Daniel Wollenberg said this explicitly in an interview with Radio Rüsselsheim.

This makes everything dependent on the state's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Premier Volker Bouffier, who has been presented with a petition with about a thousand signatures. Appeals are also addressed to Free Democratic Party and CDU politicians, with whom the IGL has spoken, along with the state minister for economics and transport, Tarek Al-Wazir (Green Party). "Enquiries, signatures, submit a petition—that's all we can do," Wollenberg said. "What else are we supposed to do?"

The WISAG workers can no longer allow themselves to be led by the nose by bourgeois politicians and the unions. The Hesse state government and the city of Frankfurt are directly responsible for the conditions at the airport, which they own. It is these politicians who have organised the current orgy of deregulation and privatisation, selecting WISAG and the multimillionaire Wisser to perfect the means of capitalist exploitation.

Workers must turn instead to their peers, to millions of other workers around the world who face the same problems and are also looking for a way to fight against them.

The fact that the situation is ripe for this development is exemplified by a remark by a traveler at the airport who saw the demonstration of the WISAG workers. He followed them for a while, read their placards and listened to them as they drew attention to their dismissals via a megaphone. Asked for his opinion, he told the WSWS, "I am very touched by the struggle of these workers. I think it's good they are going public." He said he was personally affected by similar problems.

It turned out that he was a former Siemens employee, one of 600 workers who had lost their jobs two years ago when the Siemens factory at Kaiserlei in Offenbach was closed down.



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