

Berlin: Food delivery workers strike to defend sacked colleague

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On 9 June, about one hundred workers employed by the Berlin food delivery service known as Gorillas took spontaneous strike action to defend a fellow worker who had been summarily sacked. The affected worker is one of the company's so-called "riders."

Gorillas evidently operates on the principle of "hire and fire." On Twitter, the Gorilla employee concerned, Santiago, described what had taken place. On Wednesday morning, at the end of his shift, he was approached by a woman on the pavement in front of the delivery service's warehouse at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin. The woman did not identify herself, but merely declared he was fired with immediate effect. The employee was stunned and outraged and sought to inform fellow workers of what had taken place.

The news spread like wildfire. A few hours later, almost 70 Gorillas workers from different shifts and locations gathered in front of the delivery service's warehouse and demanded an explanation from management. When no explanation was forthcoming, the workers spontaneously decided to go on strike. The riders piled up their bicycles to form a barricade in front of the entrance to the warehouse and access was blocked.

In order to defuse the situation, a manager from the company decided to halt operations at the "Charlie" location and discuss with the workers. In the event, this discussion turned out to be "very unsatisfactory." The workers decided to extend their struggle and formed a bicycle convoy of about 100. The strikers went to the company's main depot in Berlin-Mitte to blockade the food warehouse there but were prevented from doing so by a large police presence.

In addition to demanding the reinstatement of Santiago, the strikers called for the abolition of the company's six-month probationary period and an end to all arbitrary dismissals. In future, there should be no more dismissals without three prior warnings.

The pretext for the dismissal was Santiago's failure to attend work that day at the arranged time. In fact, the young man had informed his shift supervisor (Rider-Op) that he would be late. Contrary to management's statements that there had been "negative feedback" about him, colleagues stated that Santiago was one of the best-ranked riders. At a protest rally against his dismissal, it was stressed that his sacking should be understood as a threat against all workers.

The management uses the six-month probationary period, which is very long for such a job, to fire employees without reason.

Gorillas founder and CEO Ka?an Sümer brazenly told the media that if "someone is fired, it is in the interest of our community."

The strikes and blockades continued at the Prenzlauer Berg location on June 10. Workers had earlier carried out a spontaneous strike, last February, after management failed to guarantee secure conditions for riders following the harsh onset of winter.

Gorillas promises to deliver food to customers within 10 minutes. The company hired thousands of workers within a short period of time. The riders are mostly young people and students, often from abroad, who urgently need a job to make ends meet. Gorillas pays just 10.50 euros per hour for the strenuous work involved. Consequently, work and cost pressures are considerable. Based on a delivery fee of 1.80 euros, the ordered goods have to be packed within minutes and delivered quickly in all weather and traffic conditions.

Under this enormous pressure, working conditions are almost unbearable. Riders are currently racing through Berlin in the middle of a heat wave. The German television station ZDF describes some of the consequences as follows: Back pain due to heavy, bulky deliveries; assignments at short notice that make any sort of private life extremely difficult; and uncertain wage payments and permanent pressure.

Der Spiegel also describes the working conditions as "in part hellish." Several other delivery services have also been reported to maintain dangerous working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance regulations are difficult to observe in the narrow warehouses, and disinfectants and FFP2 masks are also not available everywhere.

A female driver described the hard work to Zeit-Online. She complained about the sometimes very heavy loads, such as bottles in backpacks, which have to be transported over cobblestones on bikes without suspension. Although no more than ten kilograms should be carried per order, this figure is not checked. The heavy transports have caused bruises on her back. Several employees wrote an open letter to complain: "We are drivers, not racehorses."

In order to survive the pressure of competition, delivery services are resorting to increasingly drastic means to monitor workers. The food delivery service Lieferando was recently severely criticized after reports that its couriers were being monitored by a tracking app. To work for the company, employees have to download the app onto their mobile phones, but it remains unclear what data is being retrieved by the management.

In fact, the business model of the start-up is built on the principle

of the extreme exploitation of its workers. Gorillas was founded in the spring of 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic. Investors poured more than 280 million euros into the food delivery service in just four months, enabling it to achieve a market valuation of one billion dollars in record time. This ranks the company as a so-called “unicorn” in business circles.

The delivery services market has grown rapidly in recent years, with no end in sight. Several competitors vying with Gorilla for market share are waiting in the wings. The Turkish company Getir, for example, has now expanded its operations to Germany.

Getir is described as a pioneer in express food delivery. In 2015, the company was founded in Istanbul and experienced enormous growth during the pandemic last year. Orders can currently be placed via the app in thirty Turkish cities. Since the end of January, the firm has expanded to London and Amsterdam. In addition to the American market, the focus is now also on Germany and France. To this end, the company raised a total of \$550 million from investors. Getir currently has a market valuation of \$7.5 billion.

Other delivery services with allegedly even shorter delivery times and lower costs are about to enter the market. The delivery service Flink is also in direct competition with Gorillas. The start-up, built in cooperation with the German retail giant Rewe, also raised 245 million euros in start-up capital in a very short time and is now active in 18 cities across Germany.

Levels of fierce competition were already evident in the past with other delivery services. For example, the delivery service Lieferando achieved monopoly status through its takeover of Foodora and the demise of Deliveroo. The Dutch parent company of the food delivery service, Just Eat Takeaway, is increasing its turnover by more than half, to around 2.4 billion euros in 2020.

The Gorillas workers’ industrial action has received wide support, with dozens of statements of solidarity from many countries appearing on social media such as Twitter. It is becoming increasingly clear that similar forms of extreme exploitation are affecting more and more people. A new, important layer of the working class has emerged: young, militant and very well connected internationally.

Miserable working conditions, where maximum performance is demanded and often less than the minimum wage is paid, together with no social security, no sickness benefit or pension contributions, etc.—these conditions are no longer an exception, but increasingly the rule.

Many companies in Germany’s leading industrial sectors, such as the auto and auto supply industry, electrical industry, steel processing and others, have used the pandemic as an opportunity to implement mass dismissals, wage cuts and a deterioration of working conditions. Parts of companies are being outsourced and workers forced to work under far worse conditions.

Ruling circles and the German government are very concerned about the growing willingness to fight, as shown in the spontaneous Gorilla strike. They are afraid that the militancy of the precariously employed workers will combine with growing resistance against mass dismissals and wage cuts in industrial enterprises, transport companies and public administration.

To counter this, trade union-led works councils are to be formed

in delivery services and other areas of precarious employment. The aim is to mobilize the unions to prevent spontaneous strikes and any broader mobilization of workers. To this end a so-called “Works Council Modernization Act” was passed in the Bundestag last month to facilitate the formation of works councils. At Gorillas, the formation of a works council was initiated earlier this year in close cooperation with Germany’s Food and Hostelry union (NGG).

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) rejects this initiative. A works council led by the NGG will not improve working conditions. Wherever the NGG or other unions have influence, wages and working conditions have invariably deteriorated in recent years.

Germany’s long-standing Works Constitution Act obliges works councils to “cooperate in a spirit of trust” and to comply with all agreements, and the works council is prohibited from calling strikes and other industrial action. Instead, it is obliged to work for the “welfare of the company.”

The formation of a works council will not abolish slave labour at Gorillas, but rather regulate and cement it. At the same time, the organizing of spontaneous strikes is made much more difficult because during the term of contract agreements workers are legally obliged to keep the peace, i.e., a ban on strikes.

We urge workers at Gorillas to form an action committee based on the tradition of independent workers’ councils, free from the influence of the union bureaucracies, which function as a company police force. Such an action committee is able to link up with workers in other production and administrative sectors and other countries, to develop a common strategy, not to “humanize” slave labour and make it bearable, but rather abolish it.



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