Resistance spreads among German delivery service workers

Our reporters
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Protests and strikes by delivery workers against deplorable working conditions and poor pay are spreading to include more and more companies in Germany.

At the food delivery service Gorillas there have been strikes and protests in Berlin for months. Several times, the start-up's warehouses had to be closed, and deliveries came to a standstill. Last Friday, bicycle delivery couriers demonstrated in 10 German cities against the miserable working conditions at Gorillas, Lieferando, Wolt and other delivery services and marched in front of their company headquarters.

Protests are also taking place in other countries. In New York, the "Deliveristas" have started to organise. The independent food delivery drivers, who number about 80,000 in New York City alone, work using apps like Grubhub and Uber Eats.

Riders are among the most exploited section of the working class. They are poorly paid, have impossible working conditions and put their health and lives at risk in big city traffic.

The coronavirus pandemic has boosted the industry, as many people prefer to have food and other goods delivered rather than face the risk of infection in a supermarket.

For investors, this is a gold mine. Constantly on the lookout for highly profitable investment opportunities for the billions that central banks and governments have pumped into the markets as coronavirus "aid," they smell high profits.

The startup Gorillas, which began operations in June 2020, achieved a market valuation of more than $1 billion within 10 months and is therefore considered a "unicorn" in financial circles. Its economic model is simple: It promises customers delivery of ordered goods within 10 minutes and uses bicycle couriers, who must meet the target in all weather and traffic conditions.

But Gorillas is far from the only delivery service trying to hold its own in the fiercely competitive market. Only those who exploit workers to the hilt can prevail.

Most recently, the company has had problems raising money from investors, according to press reports. According to the *Financial Times*, company CEO Kagan Sümer was originally aiming for a valuation of US$6 billion, but so far Gorillas is "only" valued at $2.5 billion. The US delivery service Doordash has even expressed interest in taking over Gorillas but at a rather low price.

Nevertheless, Gorillas continues its expansion undeterred. The company is now operating in Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and the US. This month, Gorillas brought on board Deena Fox, who was previously head of human resources at online retail giant Amazon, where she was responsible for employees in North America. At Gorillas, she will introduce the exploitative measures that Amazon has long practised.

The protests by riders have even caught the attention of the German government. In mid-July, Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (Social Democratic Party, SPD) visited striking Gorillas workers in Berlin-Kreuzberg. He wanted to get a picture of the "real situation" and the "concrete problems of the workers" on the spot, Heil said in a subsequent press briefing.

The government, especially the SPD, is afraid that the protests at delivery services could spread and ignite a conflagration, which they want to prevent at all costs, especially during the Bundestag (federal parliament) election campaign.

The SPD, which has always provided the labour minister since the beginning of the century, except for four years, first created the conditions for the low-wage sector with the "Hartz" and other laws attacking welfare and labour rights in which millions are being exploited. Now, Heil used the riders' strike as a photo opportunity for an election campaign appearance to try and portray

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himself and the SPD as opponents of extreme exploitation. The outrageous action was strongly criticised by riders.

Heil is responsible for having the Works Council Modernisation Act passed by the Bundestag in May, which is supposed to make it easier to set up works councils. The aim is not to improve workers' rights and incomes but to strengthen the stranglehold of the trade unions, which exert their influence in the factories mainly through the works councils. The unions' role is to suppress and prevent spontaneous strikes, as at Gorillas.

Several pseudo-left groups have supported this and advocate the formation of a works council at Gorillas. Only the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) rejects this, proposing instead to form an action committee based on the tradition of workers councils. "Such an action committee," WSWS wrote, "is able to link up with workers in other production and administrative sectors and in other countries, to develop a common strategy, not to 'humanise' slave labour and make it tolerable, but rather to abolish it."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Augustin, a rider at the delivery company Wolt, on the periphery of the demonstration in Berlin on Friday. He has been employed by the Finnish company for just under a year and described his working conditions and those of his colleagues.

These had changed a lot, "especially in the last two weeks." he said. "We used to get a bonus of €160 for 150 deliveries, but that has now been abolished." He is now on his second six-month contract, and "the new contract is even worse than the first. They treat us really badly."

There was also little support for riders with problems. "When we have problems, we don't have support anymore. Now, there is only an automated recorded announcement. For example, if a rider has trouble with their bike, there is no response. That means we are expected to organise and pay for repairs during working hours."

The work pressure is also enormous. Sometimes distances of six kilometres must be covered, and always on the shortest route, even if that is not possible.

The effects of this were shown last week. A Gorillas rider was seriously injured in a traffic accident in Berlin-Charlottenburg. According to the police, he went through a red light and was hit by a car. The rider suffered multiple fractures to his leg and a vertebra as well as a head injury.

Undoubtedly, such accidents are due to the pressure exerted on riders. Gorillas advertises that delivery is made 10 minutes after the order is placed. It is not surprising that traffic rules are disregarded to comply with this. According to a report in *Abendzeitung*, there were 17 accidents involving riders in Munich alone in one week.

As Augustin also confirmed, the companies do not care if it is hot or cold, or if it is pouring down rain. At the same time, riders always have to fight for their wages, although these are usually at the level of the minimum wage anyway. At Gorillas, there have already been protests over this issue.

Delivery service for the Domino's Pizza chain is also making headlines, as workers are even having amounts deducted from the minimum wage. The *Berliner Tagesspiegel* recently reported about a student who was hired as a delivery driver at a Berlin branch and had to hand over 35 cents per tour for an hourly wage of €9.50, allegedly to account for a "flat rate tip."

The student told *Tagesspiegel*, "On my first day, I did 20 tours, so I had to pay seven euros into the cash register. I only received a tip of three euros. So, I had to pay the remaining four euros out of my own pocket."

When he spoke to his supervisor about this, he was fired the next day. In addition, another €50 was withheld from his salary on flimsy grounds.

In June, a worker in a branch in Leipzig was dismissed after he demanded coronavirus tests for employees. The dismissal has since been withdrawn by the company.

Domino's is also making record profits on the backs of workers. After the company acquired former market leader Joey's Pizza in 2015 and Hallo Pizza in 2019, it recorded around €290 million in sales in Germany alone last year, up €60 million from the previous year.

Augustin also reported how it is hard to make ends meet on such a low salary. He works part-time and has to use a normal bicycle. He would have to pay €70 a month for an e-bike (electric bike), which is simply not possible given his low earnings.

Asked how workers should conduct the struggle for better working conditions and higher wages, Augustin replied, "I think independent workers committees are necessary. People work in the gig economy because they have no alternative."

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