

Riders at German delivery firm Gorillas protest illegal mass sackings

Johannes Stern
11 October 2021

Employees of the Gorillas delivery service held a protest Wednesday in front of the company's headquarters in the German capital of Berlin. In total, more than 100 riders—as the couriers are called—and supporters came together to loudly demonstrate for better working conditions and the reinstatement of several colleagues.

The billion-dollar start-up announced last Tuesday that all employees who participated in work stoppages over the previous weekend would be terminated. On Friday and Saturday, Gorillas bike couriers went on strike against conditions of abuse and paralyzed several warehouses. It is still unclear how many employees were given notice by letter or telephone. According to the latest reports, there are over 300.

This is a massive attack on the right to strike that goes far beyond the Gorillas delivery service. The ruling class is launching an all-out attack on working conditions and wages around the world.

In Germany, the Social Democrats, Free Democrats and the Greens are preparing a new government whose central tasks will be to enforce the debt brake so as to restrict public spending and squeeze the hundreds of billions of euros that were funnelled to the banks and corporations under the guise of the coronavirus bailout packages out of the working class. With the federal election now over, mass layoffs and the shutdown of entire industrial plants are being implemented. The employers are demanding, in the words of Ford Germany boss Gunnar Herrmann, "gigantic flexibility."

The message being sent with the mass sackings at Gorillas is clear: anyone who is not prepared to accept conditions of slave-like exploitation must expect severe consequences.

The company's management makes no secret of the fact that the terminations are a punishment for the strikes. A company spokesman said on Tuesday evening, "Such unannounced strikes that are not supported by a trade union are illegal. After careful consideration, we are now forced to enforce this legal framework. This means that we end the employment relationship with those employees who actively participated in the unauthorized strikes and blockades, who hindered the company through their behaviour and thus endangered their colleagues."

The arrogance and aggressiveness of the billion dollar company is breathtaking. It is not the striking workers fighting for fair and safe working conditions who are endangering their colleagues, but company management.

Slavery-like exploitation

At the demonstration, numerous riders reported on the completely unsustainable working conditions at Gorillas and the brutal behaviour of the company.

A 21-year-old Gorillas rider, who asked to remain anonymous for fear

of reprisals, reported that the strikes began on Friday, October 1 in Bergmannkiez in the Neukölln district and then quickly spread to the warehouses in Schöneberg and Mitte. On Saturday, a strike also took place at the Gesundbrunnen warehouse. On Tuesday, the company then carried out a "blatant attack on the employees," as the worker described it.

"All the people on strike who had no protection against dismissal have been terminated without notice," the rider explained. "Some by letter and some by phone. This is of course completely illegal. That is why we are protesting against the working conditions and the action on the part of the company. We demand the reinstatement of those who have been terminated."

Strikes among Gorillas delivery workers already took place repeatedly in spring and summer. The 21-year-old rider reports that working conditions have even worsened since then.

"The shift times are now issued by a computer," he said. "Accordingly, the shift times are extremely short. I have a 30-hour contract and work six days a week. Four days in advance, the legal minimum, you will be notified of your shift. You can no longer plan your free time because you never know when and where you have to work."

He went on to describe the extreme workload during a shift, commenting, "We have six orders in one backpack, and that happens over and over again. Sometimes you can't even close the rucksack because it's overloaded, and you still have to deliver everything. I have no idea how heavy the backpack is sometimes, maybe 40 kilos. You can hardly get it on your back. And that's what it's like for the whole shift for eight hours."

There are also virtually no safety measures to protect workers from the COVID-19 pandemic. "The disinfectant dispensers are usually empty and you really have to beg for masks," remarked the worker.

Another rider, Camilo, reported that workers often receive their starvation wages late or are not paid in full.

"This is a problem that has existed since the beginning," he told us. "I've been with Gorillas for a year now and there are wage issues every month. There is no regular payment and often people only get €100 or €200, although they ought to get €1,000, for example. This means that many workers are left without income and still have to pay their rent, etc."

Camilo also pointed to the generally poor condition of the bikes, with potentially fatal consequences.

"Nobody in the stores is responsible for ensuring that the bikes are in good condition," he said. "Very often, workers ride their bicycles and, for example, the seat falls off or something breaks, which leads to accidents. Accidents are very common at this company. That also has to do with the company's business model, which promises to deliver within 10 minutes. There have been very serious accidents. People with broken limbs, people who needed an operation. There was even a rider who almost died."

There is broad solidarity with the workers among the population. Alexander took extra time off to support the protest. "I want to set an example because I find the working conditions under which people work

here unbearable,” he said. “The people who work here are completely overworked. Driving around 100 kilometres a day with 20 kilos on your back is impossible. The sackings were the tipping point for me.”

Alexander pointed out that the attacks are part of a wider political development.

“Workers’ rights have been dismantled for a long time and attempts are being made to continue to dismantle them,” he commented. “Many people are angry and no longer feel represented by the political parties. The social divide is getting bigger and bigger and this is happening on the backs of the people who work here. Even the housing market is being capitalized. How can we still lead a good life in this city without working 80 hours a week? There is enough money, but you have to distribute it differently, you have to organize it differently. That is long overdue.”

Which way forward in the struggle for better working conditions and wages?

The struggle at Gorillas raises important issues that the entire working class confronts. What form of organization and what political perspective is necessary to combat and abolish once and for all exploitative working conditions like those that prevail at Gorillas?

Many of the protesting workers, including Camilo and his colleague, are members of the “Gorillas Workers Collective” (GWC), which was founded independently of the Verdi trade union at the beginning of the year. The workers have made the experience that the union not only does not represent their interests, but wants to control and suppress their struggle. “When we established contact with Verdi, one of Verdi’s demands to us was: no more wildcat strikes. They wanted to take control of the protest. Of course we don’t agree.”

Verdi and the federal government advocate the formation of works councils at Gorillas and other companies in the so-called “New Economy.” The goal they are pursuing is clear. As in other areas, a works council sanctioned by the trade unions and management is supposed to control the workers, suppress their struggles and thus prevent them from becoming the starting point for a broader movement of the working class. In May, Germany’s federal parliament even passed a Works Council Modernisation Act, which is supposed to facilitate the establishment of works councils.

The representatives of the GWC with whom the WSWS spoke also advocate the establishment of a works council. However, they emphasize that it must be independent of management and the Verdi union. “What we are creating is not a works council that will work with the company. We want that as a counterweight, but we are organized ourselves. We’re not from Verdi. We don’t have that much to do with them and we don’t want to have anything to do with them,” explained a GWC representative. He is well aware of the limitations and the potentially anti-worker character of the works council perspective. “Over time, the works council will split up anyway,” he said. “And then there has to be another revolution or whatever.”

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and the WSWS explained in a previous statement why the focus on establishing a works council is a dead end.

“Works councils are not allowed to call job actions and are obliged by law to work for the company’s wellbeing, to work trustfully with the employer and to keep all information secret. ... With the formation of a works council, slave labour is not abolished at Gorillas, but contractually regulated and cemented. The organization of strikes will become more difficult, because during the term of collective agreements there is a statutory requirement to observe labour peace, i.e. a strike ban.”

The recent mass sackings have underlined that Gorillas’ management will only accept a works council that corresponds to its interests. At the same time, there are many indications that the move is part of a broader restructuring of the company in order to accelerate the exploitation even further. According to a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “among the founders in Berlin’s start-up scene ... business models are discussed that are already common in the USA: that agencies only contract the drivers to the suppliers to reduce personnel costs on the balance sheet.”

In August, efforts by Gorillas to secure a \$400 million investment deal with the largest US on-demand delivery service, Doordash, failed. According to media reports, Doordash is said to have asked Gorillas to stop its expansion in the US for the time being and instead work to reduce its losses in its European markets.

It is obvious that a single works council cannot do anything against the globally operating delivery giants, which literally make enormous profits on the back of the workers. When Doordash went public on the New York stock exchange on December 9, 2020 amid the pandemic, the company generated \$ 3.4 billion in revenue. Gorillas, which only started deliveries in June 2020, now enjoys the status of a start-up “unicorn” with a market valuation of over \$1 billion.

The fight for rank-and-file committees and a socialist perspective

To repel the company’s attacks, the riders in Berlin must establish connections with their colleagues across Germany and around the world. According to its own information, Gorillas now employs around 10,000 drivers in 18 German cities, including Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, Karlsruhe and Leipzig, four European countries (England, France, Italy and the Netherlands) and in New York City. Other delivery services such as Just Eat Takeaway/Lieferando are also active globally with several thousand employees.

Other sections of the working class—such as the striking nurses and teachers in Berlin—should also be contacted and mobilized. Workers around the world are facing similar attacks by capitalist governments and transnational corporations and are beginning to rebel against them. In the United States on Sunday, over 10,000 workers at agricultural engineering giant John Deere rejected by 90 percent a contract backed by the United Auto Workers union. In South Africa, over 150,000 steel and metal workers went on strike last Tuesday.

On May 1, the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International called for the establishment of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to create new, independent organizations of struggle for workers in all industries, and to link up the developing struggles internationally.

This offensive, as necessary as it is urgent, directly raises the question of a socialist perspective. The statement calling for the establishment of the International Workers Alliance declares, “The fight against the pandemic, and against war, inequality, exploitation and dictatorship, is a fight against the entire capitalist social and economic order. Workers of all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the oligarchs, and establish a socialist society based on the rational, scientific and democratic control of production for the purpose of serving social need, not private profit.”

We call on all Gorillas workers to discuss these issues with us very carefully and seriously. This is the only way to successfully fight for the reinstatement of colleagues and for decent and safe working conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact