

Germany: Dismissed airport worker reports on his lawsuit against WISAG

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This week will see the court case of airport worker Cemalettin Benli against his employer, ground services company WISAG. Benli is one of 232 ground workers who were terminated by WISAG ten months ago, allegedly “due to the pandemic.” He is suing WISAG for reinstatement. The *World Socialist Web Site* had the opportunity to speak with Benli about his case.

“It’s the first time I’ve been in court,” Benli says. He reports that he had worked at the airport for 36 years, since 1985. “I’ve had a lot of responsibility lately, doing everything at WISAG, coordinating baggage, cargo and field services, and pitching in everywhere.”

And then, just before Christmas 2020, “We received our termination notice as a Christmas present. That was the thanks I got.” It pains him every time he thinks about it, “We helped make the company grow.” With about 20 colleagues, he said, he built up operations at the airport from scratch. “And then WISAG comes along and just kicks us out.”

As a severance package, management initially offered him 4,000 euros as a one-time sum. “Later, they increased it to 30,000 euros. I rejected that. 30,000 euros for 22 years that I worked in this company. I gave my life for the airport!”

The WISAG empire, which employs some 50,000 people and is owned by Frankfurt oligarch and billionaire Claus Wisser (a member of the Social Democratic Party, SPD), took over ground services at Rhine-Main Airport four years ago, having already implemented a programme of wage dumping in Berlin using dummy, temporary and subsidiary companies. In Frankfurt, too, the red pencil was applied, and finally the pandemic provided the corporation with the appropriate excuse to ruthlessly replace long-serving skilled workers with cheaper contract workers.

“At the end of 2017, WISAG took us over from Acciona, one-to-one at first,” Benli says. “But then they started cutting back in all departments. Because of the pandemic, they told us, we had fewer aircraft—but that wasn’t true. Especially the big cargo planes kept running.”

The 232 workers were laid off without notice. “They were going to cut back anyway, but the reason they gave was the pandemic,” he said.

Meanwhile, almost a year after the layoffs, WISAG is hiring

new people at Frankfurt Airport again almost every day—but at minimum wages and under new conditions. “They are hiring again, yes, but through the temporary agencies,” Benli explains. “On the one hand, they’re laying people off, and on the other hand, they’re hiring new people.”

The worker, who has spent 37 years of his life at the airport, says he is “not at all well now—neither mentally nor financially. My family is broken.”

He explains, “I earned very well and made plans because of my wages. I used to have a two-and-a-half-room apartment, but now we live in three-and-a-half rooms. In addition, I bought an apartment for when I retire, so that when the children move out, I can move in there with my wife. As a result, I have debts, of course. I had planned all this exactly because of my salary—and all of a sudden, the notice to quit was there. That caused me a lot of trouble.”

Above all, the condominium is a bureaucratic headache. “This apartment, which I own myself—and which I’m still paying for! I don’t get a cent of income from this apartment yet,” Benli says. “When I apply for child support or housing benefits, they demand that I sell the apartment. But it’s my retirement fund after all.”

At the end of each month, he says, he has great difficulty meeting his rent. “I live in the red, often can’t think straight. The airport was considered the safest job imaginable. How could I have known that after 37 years this pandemic would come, and that I would then be unemployed? Normally, after 17 years, you can’t be sacked.”

Cemalettin Benli and most of his dismissed colleagues did not accept their sacking without a struggle. They took up the fight against it, organizing literally dozens of demonstrations and rallies—at the airport, in front of the company headquarters, in front of the owner’s private villa, in Wiesbaden in front of the state parliament—all standing together. At the end of February, they even went on a hunger strike for eight days.

“I went along with the hunger strike,” Benli says. “We will continue to fight until the last. We won’t give up, and the capitalists will see that they gave us notice for nothing. They will not always win. We are fighting for our rights, and we want our jobs back.”

Almost all his colleagues who were terminated along with

Benli in December 2020 have gone to court against WISAG. But it turned out that the cases at the Frankfurt labour court are being heard by a judge who had previously worked as a corporate lawyer at one of the best-known law firms, Clifford Chance. So far, almost all workers have lost their case in the first instance, with the exception of a very few colleagues, one of whom was considered to be a member of the local Council of Foreigners and therefore not subject to dismissal.

The workers have had a lot of experience in this struggle, including with politicians from the establishment parties. “They all let us down,” Benli says. “In the beginning, we turned to politicians who promised to help us. But then all of a sudden, they all disappeared. When the elections were over, they forgot about us.”

On March 16, two days after the Hesse local elections, a debate on the WISAG layoffs took place in the state parliament in Wiesbaden. The dismissed workers demonstrated in front of the state assembly and handed over a petition for their reinstatement with more than a thousand signatures to the state deputies. Members of the state assembly Turgut Yüksel (SPD), Yanki Pürsün (Free Democratic Party, FDP) and Janine Wissler (Left Party) promised to stand up for them.

However, it became clear that the entire political establishment is on the side of WISAG. The Hesse state executive is a shareholder in Rhine-Main Airport and as such is involved in all decisions, including those regarding the layoffs at WISAG.

For example, Hesse state Finance Minister Michael Bodenberg (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) is Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Fraport AG, which operates the airport. His colleague Kai Klose (SPD), minister for Social Affairs and Integration, was asked directly about the fate of the laid-off WISAG workers on March 16 and confirmed on behalf of the state government: “We are, of course, exchanging views on this intensively.”

Commenting on the WISAG layoffs, Tarek Al-Wazir (Greens), who as state Minister of Economics and Transport is personally responsible for safe operations at the airport, said it would be “misguided for the state government to interfere in these business policy decisions.”

“The politicians are not behind us,” Benli says. And the same was true of the media and the unions, he added.

“I gave an interview to broadcaster ZDF twice,” Benli reported. “Almost everything I told them, they cut out. They didn’t even mention the name WISAG. Out of over two hours of footage, they ended up showing just two and a half minutes.”

The WISAG workers had the worst experience with Verdi, the service union that stabbed the workers in the back at the airport as the in-house union of the air companies.

“The Verdi people don’t stand behind the workers,” Benli says, “when they are laid off or anything else is. They don’t care about it. All that matters to them is their earnings, nothing else. To this day, they have not contacted us.” Benli recounts

how workers had placed a funeral wreath in front of Verdi headquarters as a sign that Verdi was dead to them. “You can’t use Verdi anywhere.”

The same was true of the WISAG works council, he said. For example, Benli and his dismissed colleagues—all of them with more than twenty years’ service and some of them severely disabled—had been dismissed with an illegitimate notice period of only three or four months, he said. WISAG had relied on an agreement the company had with the works council. “The works council did the dirty on us,” Benli reports. “The works council is partly to blame for everything that happened. And Verdi didn’t give us any support.”

That is why the workers have joined forces independently of Verdi to take up the fight against the layoffs. In doing so, they have so far received support only from the WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), which organized international solidarity for the ground workers’ struggle, revealing what a huge potential for struggle there is in the international working class.

Berlin and London bus drivers, American, British and Turkish teachers and several rank-and-file committees for education and safe workplaces from different countries spoke out in support of the struggling WISAG workers. The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the industrial action at Frankfurt Airport in several languages around the world.

Benli says, “We workers must all stand together internationally. This has to happen worldwide, not just in Germany. I don’t believe the unions anymore. They only look at their coffers so they can drive big cars. They don’t know how families make ends meet. For them, only their revenues count, nothing else.”

Regarding the WISAG workers’ motto: “Today it’s us—tomorrow you,” Benli says, “I said that back then, and it’s becoming more and more true. From one day to the next, it can affect anyone! What we, the airport workers at Frankfurt Airport, experienced, no worker in the automotive industry—at Opel, Mercedes, VW—is safe from today. The capitalists will keep laying people off until we all go out on the streets together and fight.”



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