

Dock workers strike at six German ports

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Thousands of dockworkers at Germany's major ports went on strike Thursday at the beginning of the early shift. The ports of Hamburg, Emden, Bremerhaven, Bremen, Brake and Wilhelmshaven were affected.

This was the second 24-hour warning strike in the ongoing contract bargaining round. Approximately 12,000 dockers had already stopped work on June 9. Dock workers are not prepared to accept the wage dictates of the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS) and, in view of rapid price increases, are demanding appropriate compensation for inflation.

The trade union Verdi is leading the negotiations in the 58 port companies in Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Bremen covered by the contract. Verdi's demands are very limited; they include an increase in hourly wages of €1.20 and, in container companies, an increase in the annual allowance of €1,200. Because neither of these would even compensate for the already horrendous inflation, the union has also demanded an unspecified "compensation for actual inflation."

In fact, even these minimal demands, which do not recompense the wage theft already caused by the price increases, will not be pushed through by Verdi. The union is desperately seeking a deal with the employers, but these are not even willing to make cosmetic concessions.

After a long period of hesitation, ZDS presented an offer that meant a massive real wages cut. Under the new contract, wages would increase by 3.2 percent for this year and by only 2.8 percent next year. In addition, there would be a one-off payment of €600. In a provocative statement, the employers' association said that "in combination with the federal government's relief package" this was equivalent to an adjustment for inflation.

When the union's negotiating commission rejected the offer as non-negotiable and announced strike action because it feared workers' anger, the ZDS reacted angrily. "We are in the middle of an absolutely exceptional situation," ZDS negotiator Ulrike Riedl said in a written statement.

Global supply chains had been severely disrupted, he said. On the one hand, there was a large wave of delayed ships approaching ports; on the other hand, there were major

bottlenecks in rail freight transport, which delayed onward carriage and caused additional storage costs. Calling warning strikes now was absolutely irresponsible, Riedl said.

The Kiel Institute for World Trade (IfW) also warned against the effects of a dock strike and drew attention to the ongoing disruptions in container shipping in the North Sea.

International trade was suffering greatly from the congestion and delays in container shipping, which were now also reaching the North Sea, Vincent Stamer, head of Kiel Trade Indicator, explained in the current issue of *World Trade Indicator*.

Container ships are also backed up in the North Sea off the ports of Germany, Holland and Belgium. According to the IfW, almost 2 percent of global freight capacity is currently stuck there and cannot be loaded or unloaded. About a dozen large container ships with a total capacity of about 150,000 standard containers were waiting to dock in Hamburg or Bremerhaven, according to a press release.

But dockworkers were not intimidated and stuck to their demand for compensation for inflation and an increase in real wages.

The employers then presented a new "final" offer, which included Verdi's demand for an increase in hourly wages of €1.20. In the area of car shipping, where many low-wage workers are employed in so-called car handling, the hourly wage would increase by only 90 cents. The employers agreed to increase the allowance to the €1,200 demanded and, as compensation for inflation, there would be a one-off payment of €1,000 in container operations and €500 in conventional ones. At the same time, however, the contract duration would be extended by six months.

Verdi's negotiating commission showed that calculated overall, the new offer was pure sham and with a duration of 18 months, meant a deterioration compared to the first offer.

This was followed by the second warning strike, in which even more workers participated on Thursday, marching in protest demonstrations through Hamburg, Bremen and other port cities.

It has been several decades since dockers in Germany have gone on strike. Up to now, Verdi and its predecessors have always negotiated a compromise, which they pushed through

even if it meant real wage losses and a deterioration in working conditions. This has resulted in hourly wages of between only €14 and €20 being paid for the hard and often dangerous work of loading large containers and operating container gantry cranes.

Even now Verdi is trying to reach an agreement as quickly as possible.

Workers must be on their guard and organise themselves independently of Verdi in rank-and-file action committees to extend the strike and assert their own interests.

Verdi is closely linked to the governing Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens and supports the government's policy of imposing the cost of billions in corporate giveaways and military build-up on the working class through massive price hikes and lowering living standards.

Verdi has already signed collective agreements in other sectors, such as the printing industry, insurance, private banking and newspapers, which are far below what the port employers have offered. Most of these Verdi wage agreements run for two years and consist of one or two one-off payments of €500 and annual wage increases of 1.5 to 3 percent. Like the IG Metall union, Verdi also rejects seeking compensation for inflation.

The real level of inflation is much higher than the usual figures quoted. Above all, prices for food, heating, rents and energy, which represent a particularly heavy burden on those dependent on low and middle incomes, have risen several times more than the official inflation rate. The World Bank expects international food prices to rise by 22.9 percent this year. For many workers and their families, this threatens their very existence; they are simply no longer able to make ends meet on their monthly salaries.

In addition, there are unbearable levels of work stress, the threat of losing jobs and the consequences of the government's ruthless coronavirus policy, which has claimed 140,000 lives in Germany alone and infected 3.6 million, one in 10 of whom are suffering from long-term consequences.

On the other hand, profits in many corporations are rising astronomically. The top companies listed on the German Dax index have also set new profit records. In the first quarter of 2022, their profits were 21 percent higher than in the same period of the previous year. The large container shipping companies are also taking advantage of the crisis to make massive profits. Because the demand for overseas transport exceeds the supply of available shipping capacity, freight rates are being driven up. Nevertheless, it is workers who are made to bleed.

All over the world, workers are concluding that they must fight if they are to defend their rights and gains. The number of strikes and protests has increased significantly around the

world—from the US to Europe, Asia and Africa. This week, 50,000 rail workers are taking strike action in Britain.

Dockers in Germany need to see their wages struggle as part of this international mobilisation of the working class, and they need to address the issues today facing workers everywhere.

First, any successful struggle requires a break with the unions which, despite their sometimes radical words, are unreservedly on the opposite side. Independent rank-and-file action committees must be built to organise the struggle for higher wages and compensation for the rising cost of living.

Second, no struggle can be won within the framework of one company or country. Workers must unite across all workplaces, industries and countries to unleash their full fighting power.

A year ago, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was launched to provide these struggles with an organisational form and a political orientation.

“For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions,” the founding statement reads. “The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale.”

This is of utmost importance for any strike or industrial action today.



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