Third strike of dock workers at major German seaports

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On Thursday thousands of dock workers at Germany's major seaports in Hamburg, Emden, Bremerhaven, Bremen, Brake and Wilhelmshaven once again went on strike. It is the third and, at 48 hours, the longest warning strike in the current round of collective bargaining. The 12,000 port workers previously conducted temporary work stoppages on June 9 and 23.

Last Tuesday, negotiations with the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS) were again broken off without producing results. Although this is the seventh round of negotiations that the employers' association has broken off, the responsible Verdi union refuses to declare the negotiations a failure, to initiate a strike ballot among the port workers or to organize an indefinite strike to enforce their position.

Instead, Verdi is desperately trying to continue negotiations and find a compromise that it can push through in the face of port workers' resistance. It is this refusal by Verdi to hold a strike ballot and organize an all-out strike that encourages the employers' association to stick to its provocative, intransigent stance.

Since negotiations began, dockworkers have repeatedly made it clear that they are not prepared to accept the wage dictates of the ZDS and that they demand adequate compensation for inflation in the face of rapid price increases.

Yesterday's demonstration and strike rally in Hamburg also focused on the demand for an appropriate wage increase that actually compensates for the massive rise in prices. Banners demanded, "Stop the inflation monster!" Again and again, workers shouted, "We are the port!" making it clear that without the hard, exhausting and dangerous labour of the port workers, nothing would move.

Five thousand workers participated in the demonstration and rally. Greetings from dockworkers from the Netherlands and Italy were read out and messages of solidarity from health workers were delivered. The message from metalworkers at the Airbus plant in Finkenwerder was met with rousing applause.

However, Verdi is trying to defuse this willingness to fight so as to prevent an indefinite, all-out strike.

For several months now, the union has been conducting negotiations among the 58 tariff-bound port companies in Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Bremen. From the outset, the union kept its demands very modest, limiting them to a €1.20 increase in hourly wages and a €1,200 increase in the annual allowance of full container operators. Because neither of these would come close to compensating for the horrendous inflation, it further demanded an unspecified "real inflation compensation."

The employers' association of port operators reacted provocatively from the outset. It began by dragging out the negotiations. Then, after a long hesitation, it presented an offer that represents a massive reduction in real wages. Collectively agreed wages were to rise by 3.2 percent this year and 2.8 percent next year. In addition, there would be a one-off payment of €600. In a statement, the employers' association said that "in conjunction with the federal government's relief package," this would correspond to compensation for inflation.

When the negotiating commission rejected the offer as providing no basis for negotiation and announced strike action, out of fear of workers' anger, the ZDS reacted with indignation. "We are in the middle of an absolutely exceptional situation," declared ZDS chief negotiator Ulrike Riedl in a written statement.

The global supply chains are severely disrupted, she said. On the one hand, there is a large wave of delayed ships approaching the ports, on the other, there are major bottlenecks in rail freight transport, which delays onward transport and causes additional storage costs. Calling for warning strikes now is absolutely irresponsible, according to Riedl.

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

The employers then presented a new "final" offer that included Verdi's demand for a €1.20 increase in hourly wages. In the area of car shipping, the "car transfer," where many low-wage workers are employed, the hourly wage is to increase by only 90 cents. The demanded increase in the allowance of €1,200 was agreed to, and to compensate for inflation there is to be a one-time payment of €1,000 in full container operations and €500 in conventional ones. The duration of the contract, however, was extended by six months.

The negotiating commission was forced to reject the new offer as well. It was a sham and, with a term of 18 months, represented a worse offer than the first one. This was followed by the second warning strike at the end of June, in which even more workers took part.

The president of the employers' association, Rainer Dulger, then spoke up with a call for the restriction of the right to strike. He was very displeased with the walkouts at a time when companies urgently needed materials, Dulger told reporters in Berlin. Perhaps what was needed was a "national state of emergency" that would

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also break the right to strike, he said.

But the dockworkers were not intimidated by this threat either. When again last week no improved offer was forthcoming, the third warning strike followed. It was twice as long and more extensive than the first two.

The port employers reacted furiously and tried to have the strike banned by court ruling. But the labour courts in Bremen, Oldenburg and Wilhelmshaven rejected the applications for interim injunctions by several port companies and declared the warning strike, even in its 48-hour extent, to be lawful.

In Hamburg, too, employers were unable to prevail in their attempt to have the ongoing warning strike stopped by the courts. However, the court stated that it had doubts as to whether all legal provisions had been observed in the preparation of the warning strike.

Without substantiating these doubts, the court proposed a settlement. It stipulates that the bargaining parties agree by the end of the week on three more negotiation dates, running until August 26. “During this period, no further industrial action will be taken by Verdi with the plaintiffs’ employees,” the labor court announced.

Verdi was immediately ready to agree to the court settlement proposal. Negotiator Maya Schwiegershausen-Güth underscored the union’s desire to reach a compromise with the employers’ association. “Striking is always the last resort, but solutions are concluded at the bargaining table,” she said. Now, she continued, it was time to return to the bargaining table and use the three court-prescribed rounds of negotiations to reach a deal.

That the Central Association of Seaport Operators also agreed was a given. “We welcome the settlement and are counting on Verdi to take constructive steps in the further negotiations to reach an agreement,” said negotiator Ulrike Riedel in her well-known arrogant manner.

Verdi is trying to reach an agreement as quickly as possible. The dockworkers must organize themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of Verdi, to expand the struggle and hold a strike ballot in preparation for a full strike.

Verdi is closely allied with the governing German Social Democratic (SPD) and Green parties and supports government policies aimed at saddling the working class with the cost of billions in giveaways to corporations and military build-up through massive price increases and low wage settlements.

Verdi has already signed collective agreements in other sectors, such as the printing industry, the insurance industry, private banking and daily newspapers, that are still far below what the port employers have offered. Verdi, like IG Metall, rejects any real compensation for inflation.

Actual inflation is in fact much higher than the index. Above all, prices for food, heating, rent and energy, which pose a particularly heavy burden on lower- and middle-income earners, have risen several times the official inflation rate.

On the other hand, profits in many corporations are rising beyond measure. Germany's DAX companies are setting new profit records. In the first quarter of 2022, their profits were 21 percent higher than in the same quarter of the previous year. The major container shipping companies are also taking advantage of the crisis to pull in massive profits. Because demand for overseas shipments exceeds the supply of available shipping capacity, freight rates are being driven up. Yet workers are being made to bleed.

All over the world, workers are beginning to fight to defend their rights and the achievements of past labour conflicts. The number of strikes and protests has increased significantly around the world, from the US to Europe and from Asia to Africa. Dockers must see their wage struggle as part of this international mobilization of the working class and must turn their attention to the tasks facing workers everywhere in the world today.

We repeat what we wrote at the time of the last strike:

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.

The International Committee of the Fourth International launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) a year ago to give these struggles an organisational form and a political orientation. The founding document states:

> 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. For this purpose, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are initiating the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

This is of the utmost importance for any strike or labour struggle today.

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