

Ground workers paralyze Lufthansa flights in Germany

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On Wednesday, Lufthansa's 20,000 ground workers largely paralyzed Europe's largest airline measured by passenger miles. The company cancelled more than a thousand flights, including 680 in Frankfurt and 350 in Munich; 134,000 passengers were affected.

The strike shows the enormous power workers have when they decide to fight. But the Verdi union, which called the one-day warning strike, has no intention of using that power. Verdi official Christine Behle, who is leading the collective bargaining negotiations with Lufthansa, assured broadcaster ARD's morning news program that there would be no further action until the next round of negotiations on August 3: "I can rule that out."

However, Lufthansa employees can only win their fight for better wages and working conditions if they break with Verdi. The union has not the slightest intention of enforcing its own wage demands, let alone taking action against the intolerable working conditions. It is officially demanding a 9.5 percent rise, or at least €350 more pay monthly for a 12-month period. This would just about compensate for inflation but would not make up for the massive loss of income in recent years.

Behle justified Verdi's demand on the basis of the precarious situation faced by Lufthansa employees. More than a third of the staff had been cut during the coronavirus crisis. Their work now had to be taken over by the remaining employees, who were "exposed to the anger of passengers on a daily basis."

"The stresses are extremely high, and many are thinking about leaving aviation permanently," Behle complained. After "three years of wages sacrifice to stabilize the company during the pandemic," she added, employees had also been hit particularly hard by the high rate of inflation.

Such cynicism leaves one almost speechless given it was none other than Verdi and Behle herself who ensured Lufthansa was able to send thousands of ground and in-flight staff packing and dictate the remaining "wages sacrifice."

Behle, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), is not only deputy chair of the Verdi trade union, but also deputy chair of the Lufthansa supervisory board. In this function, which earns her an annual salary of €140,000, she is in constant contact with Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr and the shareholders.

While the corporation collected €6 billion in coronavirus aid from the federal government, Verdi and the sectoral unions UFO and Cockpit agreed to tens of thousands of job cuts and billions in wage sacrifices. In summer 2020, UFO agreed savings of half a billion euros at the expense of the 22,000 cabin staff, while Cockpit agreed cuts of €850 million at the expense of pilots.

At the end of 2020, Verdi then agreed to a downgrading contract for ground employees. By immediately foregoing vacation and Christmas bonuses, combined with a wage freeze and a waiver of bonuses until the end of 2021, ground employees "made a savings contribution of more than €200 million to help overcome the crisis," Behle announced. The agreement with ground staff could save up to 50 percent in personnel costs for this group of employees, Lufthansa's head of human resources Michael Niggemann cheered.

"German trade unions have never before agreed to such a cut—some €1.2 billion—in the income of their members" the WSWS commented at the time. "It marks a new point of departure for union sellouts. Averaging out the impact among 130,000 current

employees, the deals will cut per-worker income by nearly €10,000.”

Verdi made sure—not only at Lufthansa—that any resistance to these massive cuts was nipped in the bud. The only exception was ground workers at Frankfurt Airport, who fought for months against their dismissal by the WISAG service company with a hunger strike and countless protests.

To wage this struggle, the WISAG workers had to break with Verdi and form an independent rank-and-file action committee. Their struggle ultimately failed because it remained isolated and the unions, the Hesse state parliamentary parties and finally the courts all stabbed them in the back.

After the Lufthansa workforce has been forced to bear the costs of the coronavirus crisis with mass layoffs and salary cuts, low wages and growing work stress, they are now supposed to ensure that the company can pay off the state aid as quickly as possible and get rid of 20 percent in federal shareholding so that the lavish profits bubble up again and the share price rises.

Working conditions are now so unbearable and wages so poor that Lufthansa is no longer able to find enough workers. As Verdi itself admits, hourly wages of less than €12 are sometimes paid at its subsidiaries LTLS and Lufthansa Cargo. That is less than the minimum wage promised by the federal government.

The union is now demanding that the hourly wage for these groups of employees be raised to at least €13! No one can live on this in expensive cities like Frankfurt and Munich, where the two most important German airports are located.

The staff shortage at the airlines and airports is now so acute that Lufthansa had to cancel 3,100 flights from the schedule during the summer months, far more than fell victim to the one-day warning strike by Verdi.

Worldwide, around 2.3 million jobs have been cut in aviation since the pandemic began, 600,000 of them in Europe. At German airports, about one-fifth of jobs are unfilled, according to the ADV airport association. A study by the Institute of the German Economy has calculated that there is a shortage of around 7,200 skilled workers for whom no replacement can be found in the short term. A high level of sick leave due to COVID infections further exacerbates the situation.

The consequences are not only flight cancellations,

delays and long queues for travellers, but also insane work pressure for the remaining staff, who are paid miserably. The situation is reminiscent of the clinics and hospitals which, also under the direction of Verdi, were cut to the bone during the pandemic.

Verdi is desperately trying to keep the growing anger over these conditions under control. That is why the union called for a warning strike at Lufthansa. In the eyes of their well-paid functionaries, the one-day strike serves the sole purpose of blowing off some steam and strengthening their own authority so that they can calmly prepare the next sell-out.

The entire international aviation industry is seething. In recent weeks, there have been and continue to be strikes at Ryanair, Easyjet, the Scandinavian airline group SAS and other airlines. Industrial action at airports, particularly in France and Spain, has led to numerous flight cancellations. Thousands of flights have also been cancelled in the US due to staff shortages at airports. At Lufthansa, the Cockpit union is currently holding a strike ballot among pilots. British Airways pilots are also preparing for a strike.

For these struggles to succeed, they must free themselves from the straitjacket of the unions and build independent rank-and-file action committees that network internationally. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its international sister parties have launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for this purpose. Make contact and register to build action committees!



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
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