

Union strangles dockworkers' strike movement in Germany

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Port workers should reject the agreement struck by the Verdi trade union last week with the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS). Contrary to Verdi's presentation, it is neither a "very good result" nor does it represent "real compensation for inflation."

On closer inspection, the wage settlement turns out to be a sham. The announced wage increase is supposedly 7.9 to 9.4 percent. However, the only components incorporated into basic wages are an increase in hourly rates of €1.20 and a lump sum of between €750 and €1,500. The so-called inflation allowance of €700 is a one-time payment.

Increases in basic wages vary in the different port operations. In those conducting full container operations it is 7.7 percent this year and 4.4 percent next year; in other port operations, including automobile handling, it is 6.24 percent and 4.4 percent respectively; and in "operations which, because of their economic difficulties, are under special conditions to safeguard employment," just 3.5 percent and 2.5 percent.

The media present this agreement as being an astonishingly high wage settlement. Verdi itself celebrates it as "the best collective agreement in Germany so far this year." The 12,000 dockworkers it covers are being led to believe they have received "real" compensation for inflation.

But the sober facts paint a different picture. Firstly, the agreement, which only applies from July 1, 2022, although the old contract had already expired in May, does not cover the first inflationary half-year. The nicely calculated percentages must therefore be halved, leaving only between 3.95 and 4.7 percent for 2022. On average, only 2 to 3.5 percent of this will find its way into net wages.

Secondly, Verdi completely ignores the miserable agreement it reached with the German Seaport Operators in June last year. That was a meagre 3 percent and meant a reduction in real wages since inflation rose above 5 percent from July 2021, and to 7 to 8 percent from March 2022. So, that agreement meant workers experienced a substantial reduction in their real incomes. Nevertheless, Verdi had also described it as a "great success."

Thirdly, in the 10 rounds of negotiations between June and August, Verdi assured its members it would never agree to a contract term longer than 12 months. But the current agreement

runs for 24 months, six months longer than the port companies themselves had offered in June.

Although inflation is forecast to remain high, at around 10 percent in 2023, Verdi has only agreed to a further maximum increase of 4.4 percent from July 2023. Should the rate of price increase be higher than 5.5 percent, an agreed clause provides for wages to be equalised up to this threshold.

Verdi knows no shame and is selling this one additional percent as compensating for inflation. To try and keep dockers quiet, the bargaining parties are holding out the prospect of a "commitment to negotiate" in "the event of a higher inflation rate," with the possibility of a special break clause in the contract.

The industrial struggle at the five North German seaports, which Verdi now wants to end with this rotten deal, has dragged on for over three months. It has great significance in several respects.

In addition to the Central Association of Seaport Operators and Verdi, the financial and economic elite also have an immense interest in preempting an all-out strike by dockworkers. Dockworkers can paralyse large parts of international logistics and therefore their strike wields great power. The corporations and their political representatives fear that full-scale industrial action by dockers in Germany could unite with a strike movement already taking place in other countries.

Since negotiations began, dockworkers in Germany have repeatedly shown their willingness to strike—for the first time in over 40 years—for adequate inflation compensation in the face of rapid price increases.

In June and July, thousands of dockworkers took part in three warning strikes in major seaports in Hamburg, Emden, Bremerhaven, Bremen, Brake and Wilhelmshaven, the final one lasting 48 hours. Employers' President Rainer Dulger used the warning strikes as an opportunity to call for a restriction of the right to strike and to invoke a "national state of emergency."

When the employers' association provocatively called off the seventh round of negotiations in July, Verdi refused to do what the dockworkers had expected: declare the negotiations a failure, initiate a ballot and organise an indefinite all-out strike.

This only encouraged the employers to go on the offensive; seeking to ban further strikes through court injunctions. The labour courts in Bremen, Oldenburg and Wilhelmshaven rejected this. The court in Hamburg, on the other hand, doubted the legality of the strike decision because of a formality and advised a settlement.

Verdi gratefully accepted this ruling, voluntarily refraining from industrial action for six weeks and from initiating the threatened ballot on an indefinite all-out strike. During these six weeks, the port companies and Verdi then developed “new instruments” behind the scenes to undermine the port workers’ willingness to strike, with ZDS negotiator Ulrike Riedel saying, “In a joint effort, we managed to find a compromise, also with the help of new instruments.”

In an August 24 information bulletin on the contract negotiations, Verdi made clear it would ruthlessly push through the agreement in every workplace and would not allow the affected dockworkers to hold a strike ballot.

A “feedback phase” will take place in all companies up to September 5, during which the results of the negotiations will be “explained” and discussed “in assemblies and company meetings.” Since the members of Verdi’s Federal Collective Bargaining Commission (BTK) have already agreed to 90 percent of the new contract, according to the union, “the BTK is refraining from holding a member survey.” After the “discussion phase,” September 5, the BTK will take the formal decision to recognise the collective agreement result, to which, it believes, there is no alternative. According to the BTK, there was “no possibility of improving the result achieved.”

Dockers should raise hell with the union officials who want to impose this result on them. Nothing has been decided yet, and dockers should make it clear to Verdi that they will not accept this sell-out.

To do this, it is necessary to immediately organise independently of Verdi. Verdi officials regard the port companies from the same pro-capitalist point of view as the corporate managers, and there is a revolving door between union headquarters and the executive boardrooms. For example, in the current collective bargaining round, Torben Seebold, former head of Verdi’s “Maritime Industry” federal specialist group, sat at the negotiating table for the employers.

And like all the trade unions in Germany, Verdi is closely linked to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Left Party—parties which govern at either federal or state level. Verdi supports the federal government and its war policies, which are placing the costs of the billions given to the corporations and the military build-up onto the backs of the working class through massive price increases and low wage settlements. The deal in the ports also serves this purpose.

Dockers must build independent rank-and-file action committees that take the struggle for higher wages and cost-of-living compensation into their own hands. As a first step, they must push through a democratic vote against the settlement,

reject the BTK’s recommended resolution and plan and launch a full-scale strike.

Secondly, they must unite across all workplaces, industries and countries to unleash the full fighting power of the working class. Millions of workers are also in conflict with employers and governments around the world. The most powerful allies of the dockers in northern Germany are the workers in the rest of the world who face the same attacks. The ports are important nodes of globalised production, connecting workers around the world.

The time is right for an international counteroffensive by port workers. Not only have the port owners made huge profits, the power of the port workers has also become visible in the strikes held so far. At Felixstowe in Suffolk, 2,000 workers only just concluded an eight-day strike at the largest container port in the UK.

Crane drivers, machine operators and stevedores at Felixstowe have rejected the offer of a 7 percent pay rise from port operator CK Hutchison Holding Ltd. The Unite union, like Verdi here, did everything it could to prevent a strike. It was only under pressure from its members that it was forced to hold ballots and reluctantly call a longer strike. In WSWS interviews and discussions during the strike, many British dockers appealed directly to their German colleagues.

Workers in Germany, Britain and around the world have been under massive attack over the last two years, forced to work despite a pandemic, skyrocketing costs of living and intolerable working conditions. More and more workers are now fighting back and responding with strikes and other industrial action.

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 political orientation.

Dockworkers in Germany who do not accept the sell-out by Verdi and want to fight against the port corporations should contact us to build action committees and prepare the struggle.



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