

Warning strike paralyses Berlin airport

Our reporters
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A one-day strike by ground crew and other workers paralysed Berlin's BER airport on Wednesday, leading to the cancellation of all 300 takeoffs and landings of passenger flights. Ground crew, airport company and aviation security workers responded to an appeal by the German public services union Verdi and stopped work at 3 a.m.

At a strike rally on Willy Brandt Platz in front of the terminal building, Verdi representatives said that the strike was in response to the refusal by the airport management to negotiate higher wages. "We expect a good offer, otherwise we will continue here," shouted Verdi state district leader Susanne Feldkötter. The strikers then marched through the airport in a demonstration demanding an end to low wages and wage cuts. The call "Proper pay for our work!" resounded through the empty airport halls.

Verdi is demanding 10.5 percent more pay for airport employees and ground crew, with at least an extra €500 per month for the next 12 months. Management, on the other hand, is demanding much longer contract terms and is only offering a very small incremental increase plus a one-time inflation compensation of €2,000 for full-time workers. The Verdi bargaining committee rejected this offer, calling it unacceptable, insufficient and disappointing.

Ulrich Rippert, candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (*Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, SGP) in the Berlin Senate election, attended the rally and spoke with workers.

Following on the heels of the latest warning strikes carried out by Berlin refuse disposal (BSR) workers and postal workers, the strike by airport personnel showed the strength and power of the working class. Despite some advance notice, the work stoppage at BER had a major impact and completely paralysed one of Europe's most important transport hubs.

But although BSR staff, post and airport workers, along with many other public service workers, are all members of the same union and are currently involved in the same

wage negotiations, the union, Verdi, is only organising isolated, short-term warning strikes.

Rather than using its apparatus to organise a common struggle of all public sector workers, Verdi is intent on sabotaging such a joint struggle. The divisive policy of the union based on local "pinprick" actions only encourages the management side in their arrogant and provocative attitude.

The head of Lufthansa, Carsten Spohr, pocketed an annual salary of €5 million before the pandemic and will receive additional bonuses for the pandemic years 2021 and 2022, despite the fact that his company received billions in state aid. Spohr criticised the strike on Wednesday, declaring that the capital should not allow itself to be blackmailed.

Representatives of the airport association ADV were also outraged, claiming the warning strike was disproportionate and lacked any real basis. "Instead of settling the different conceptions about the contract at a common negotiating table, the capital's airport is being misused as a public stage," declared ADV CEO Ralph Beisel.

Two issues were central in discussions with workers.

Firstly, many strikers stressed that the enormous price increases of the past months had created an unbearable situation. "You can't afford anything anymore. When you go shopping for food, you constantly have to think, can I afford this or not?" said one worker employed at a check-in counter. She used to work at Berlin's Tegel airport (now closed) and now has a much longer commute to work. She often needs to start work early in the morning, and the expensive fees for parking her car on the BER site are deducted from her already low salary.

The demand for €500 more per month was more than justified, she said. "But basically, it is still not enough, because who believes that prices will go down again?" she said.

The second important issue concerned the escalating war crisis and military armament. The connection between the sanctions imposed on Russia since the start of

the Ukraine war and the subsequent oil and gas freeze resulting in skyrocketing energy prices and high inflation was very clear for many strikers.

The German government is using the war in Ukraine to put into action plans for military rearmament that it has been preparing for a considerable time. The special fund of €100 billion already pledged for the Bundeswehr is only the beginning. There are discussions taking place about tripling this figure. These enormous sums are to be recouped from the population via cuts in all social spheres and by lowering wages.

A worker employed at the ground service provider Airline Assistant Switzerland (AAS) reported on the exhausting and health-threatening nature of his work: “It’s very strange where suddenly these sums of billions come from, while at the same time we are told there is no money for wage increases.”

On Tuesday, the German government agreed to deliver the Leopard 2 battle tank, thereby dramatically escalating the war in Ukraine. When asked about this, many strikers made clear their concern about this development.

Verdi’s reaction, however, is very different. Immediately after the start of the Ukraine war, it concluded a pact last year with the federal government, together with other DGB trade unions. This “Concerted Action” serves to support the war, with Verdi working closely with the government to prevent a broad strike movement. The warning strikes are aimed at allowing workers to let off steam while allowing the union to maintain control over the workforce. Having exhausted the movement Verdi invariably fobs off its members and public service workers with a miserly wage deal.

Berlin airport workers have already made many experiences in this regard.

Many ground service workers still recall the spring of 2017. At that time, the construction of BER was not yet complete and workers at both the Tegel and Schönefeld airports in Berlin rejected by a majority the wage contract agreed by Verdi. Despite the readiness of workers to strike, Verdi imposed the contract, which meant low wages for most ground services workers and at the same time a three-year ban on any further strike action.

A month previous, baggage handlers, apron workers, check-in and boarding staff had gone on strike for three days, displaying great determination and largely paralysing the two airports. Many workers, including agency workers who were not members of Verdi, had taken part in the strike for improved wages and almost 99 percent had voted for an indefinite strike.

Verdi broke off the strike, however, on the third day and held secret negotiations with a “mediator,” Ehrhart Körting, the former SPD interior senator of the Berlin Senate coalition of the SPD and Left Party. It was Körting, of all people, who had initiated the privatisation of Berlin’s airport ground services in 2008 together with Harald Wolf, (Left Party and senator for economic affairs). Even at that time, Verdi worked closely with the SPD-Left Party Senate at Berlin’s airports.

The result was the creation of five private companies at the two airports, which operated their ground services under the most exploitative conditions. The largest of these companies was WISAG, founded by the Social Democratic functionary Claus Wisser, with its various subsidiaries and subcontractors. A large proportion of the company’s employees work part-time, on temporary contracts, or as contract workers forced to cope with the massively increased passenger numbers at Berlin’s new single airport, working under intense pressure for rock-bottom wages.

These abominable working conditions and poor wages prevail up to this day and are a direct result of the collaboration between all of the parties in the Berlin Senate with Verdi.

This is why the current election campaign of the SGP is so important. SGP members and supporters distributed the party’s election programme at the rally on Wednesday. They explained that the SGP links the contract bargaining struggle with the struggle against war and military rearmament and called upon the strikers to attend the rally against war and capitalist exploitation, due to take place on Potsdamer Platz on February 4.



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