

TV and radio workers strike against corruption and for secure jobs at German broadcaster RBB

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Hundreds of workers at broadcaster Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB) went on a day-long strike on January 27, giving expression to their anger over the unrestrained enrichment and corruption at board level. Their willingness to strike was great and had an impact on current programming, with numerous broadcasts either being cancelled or replaced by programmes from other stations.

While 250 journalists, technicians and members of other professions met in front of the television centre for the strike rally, others in the various operational departments downed tools, including in the television switching room, the technology department at the Berlin studio, the RBB Kultur programme, the ARD joint facility “ARD Digital” in Potsdam, which is managed by RBB, and elsewhere.

Not a single electronic reporting team went out that day. Many programmes were affected, including RBB’s Berlin regional programming, which broadcast an emergency program. The midday TV programs were cancelled and Radio 1 broadcast only music.

Strikers spoke to WSWs reporters about their demands and their anger at the corruption on the RBB board. “The bureaucracy in the administration and the director’s office funnel outrageous salaries to themselves,” Daniel said. Like his colleagues Patricia and Thomas, Daniel works as a “freelancer” for the broadcaster. Although they do the same work as permanent employees, they receive noticeably less pay.

“We are mainly concerned with fair pay, that the work of freelancers and permanent employees is rewarded at the same level,” Thomas explained. Patricia added. “Freelancers don’t get sick pay, no health insurance subsidies, the child allowance is only 50 percent of what permanent employees get.”

Philipp, also a freelance journalist, vented his anger: “The help-yourself mentality at board level is intolerable. We need more money for good programmes, not the cuts that are now on the table.”

Asked if it was still possible to undertake critical journalism under such conditions, Franziska replied, “There are areas where it becomes difficult. I don’t think the conditions are good to do fearless journalism if you’re afraid for your job.”

In fact, major cost-cutting is imminent, which will affect the number of employees as well as pay cheques. Following the dismissal of the station’s former director, Patricia Schlesinger, her successor, Katrin Vernau, was expected to clean up the corruption. Several law firms were hired to investigate “undesirable structural developments” at the station. So far, €1.4 million in legal fees have been incurred, which are now to be recouped through cuts in programming and staff.

In addition, there are losses due to the cancellation of a Digital Media Building, whose construction had been planned by the former broadcast management, at an estimated cost of €184 million. The project has since been abandoned, but the €18 million costs incurred to date are to be saved at the expense of employees.

The previous collective agreement for permanent staff expired at the end of September 2022. The Verdi trade union had agreed to postpone negotiations on a follow-up contract for three months so that the new director would have enough time to get an overview.

When these negotiations were supposed to start on January 26, the surprise came. The RBB negotiating commission declared that it had no mandate to negotiate. The director had “not yet been able to get a complete overview of the station’s situation,” it said.

As a result, Verdi and the German Journalists’ Association (DJV) jointly called for a one-day warning strike. But RBB staff should be on their guard because Verdi is closely linked to the parties running the Berlin Senate (state executive) and represents their interests. There is a political complex linking the broadcaster’s administrative board, which is selected by the RBB Broadcasting Council, the ruling Senate parties and the union’s officials.

For example, the 29 members of the Broadcasting Council comprise representatives of churches, business associations, the DGB (German Federation of Trade Unions), Verdi, the Civil Servants’ Association, the Berlin and Brandenburg Chamber of Industry and Commerce, cultural associations, and a total of seven representatives of the parties in the state legislatures of Berlin and neighbouring Brandenburg.

These networks represent the political and economic interests of the ruling parties. This is evident in the content of television and radio programmes, in which critical positions are often suppressed. Savings in programming and job cuts are also the consequence of years of corruption.

The Berlin Senate (controlled by the Social Democrats [SPD], Left Party and Greens) supports military rearmament and the war expenditures agreed by the federal coalition government of the SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens. It is implementing drastic cuts in vital health and education provisions in the state budget. The response of the RBB board of directors to demands for wage increases and job protection is predictable. Instead of improvements for staff, further social cuts are being prepared.

In response to the horrendous demand for €1.4 million from the law firms and the extension of their brief by another three months, which has not yet been priced in, the chairman of the board of directors, Dorette König, a former staunch supporter of the Stalinist party of state in the former East Germany, gave the terse answer: “What would be the alternative?”

The RBB corruption affair is the visible expression of the right-wing developments in the media sector. It is not being cleaned up but hushed up. The few thousand euros that are now being saved on the salaries of board members will not drain the swamp but are purely window dressing.

This is also shown by the award of a lucrative consultancy contract to the former editor-in-chief, Christoph Singelstein, who left the station at the end of March 2021. Together with his pension, and a consulting contract worth €6,300 a month, his monthly income amounts to €15,000.

RBB’s ailing situation reflects the rot of capitalist society. While the media degenerate into propaganda instruments for the war policy of the federal coalition, the livelihoods of working people are being shattered.

Many young employees are disappointed with the situation at RBB. Tamara and Erik told the WSW, “We are against the way young people are treated, who are even worse off than the older ones. We will never make as much money as the older ones in this job.”

They reported that about 60 percent of employees at RBB were freelancers. “The people in digital get the lowest rate of pay. Yet digital is the future. For example, developing a YouTube format series or social media work. Television is still the best paid, followed by radio. That doesn’t reflect modern times.”

Asked what they think about the fact that hundreds of billions are spent on military rearmament and war, while at the same time drastic cuts are being made in all areas of public service, they replied, “By all means, we are against war. But the problems here existed before the war. Our struggle started long before, but now the situation is getting worse.”

This is evident in all areas of public services—Berlin city cleansing, airport services, mass transit, education and health

care. Everywhere, workers are ready to fight for their interests but are being held back by the unions. Instead of organizing a joint strike of public sector workers, they are organizing isolated warning strikes to let workers blow off steam.

As the WSW wrote when the RBB scandal was exposed:

The revival of critical, culturally elevated media is inseparable from the development of an independent movement of the working class against the bankrupt capitalist system, which only produces social and cultural decline, war, and dictatorship.

The *World Socialist Web Site* points the way there. Although it has only a tiny fraction of the financial resources of the public and commercial media, it is able to deliver high quality and critical journalism that is second to none in many areas—the pandemic, the international class struggle, the causes and background of the Ukrainian war.

It relies on the cooperation of socialists around the world who share a common goal—to arm the working masses with a historical understanding of the capitalist crisis and their own tasks, i.e., with a socialist perspective.

Anyone disgusted by the RBB scandal and the political, cultural and moral rot it exposes, and seeks a progressive way out, should read and donate to the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP).

The SGP is running in the Berlin House of Representatives elections to oppose the Senate and union network, combining the fight against social catastrophe with the fight against war.



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