

Ground staff take part in 24-hour strike at seven German airports

Our reporters
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A one-day warning strike by airport ground staff paralysed seven German airports on Friday. In addition to Dortmund, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Hanover and Bremen airports, two international flight hubs, Munich and Frankfurt/Main, the largest airport in the country, were part of the 24-hour strike. A total of around 3,000 flights for more than 300,000 passengers were cancelled.

In Frankfurt, in addition to airport security, staff from all departments of the airport operator Fraport AG participated in the strike. When the fire brigade left the airport apron with sirens sounding to join a strike rally, air traffic had to be stopped. The only flights excluded from the strike were those to Syria and Turkey, which transported supplies for the earthquake victims.

The strike also did not impact the more than 50 private flights that brought guests to the Munich Security Conference. The Verdi trade union and the German Federation of Civil Servants agreed in a special agreement to exclude them from the warning strike.

In Frankfurt, as well as in Leipzig, workers in public transport, sanitation, day care centres, social care and other services took strike action on Friday. More than 6,000 took part in strikes in the state of Hesse alone, which also included job action in Offenbach and Wiesbaden.

Over the preceding days, strikes took place in several other cities. In North Rhine-Westphalia, thousands of workers on the buses and trains, at day care centers, garbage collection, savings banks, the city administration and the motor vehicle registration offices joined the warning strike in Cologne and 15 other cities for one day each.

The service trade union Verdi, which also negotiates for the German Federation of Civil Servants (DBB) and other trade unions, is calling for a wage increase of 10.5 percent, or at least €500 per month, over one year. At the airports, Verdi is negotiating several collective agreements at the same time. In addition to the collective agreement for public services, these include the local collective agreement for ground transport services, such as Fraport, as well as the collective agreement for airport security, which is negotiated nationwide.

Representatives of the airports and municipalities expressed their horror at the extent of the strike. Ralph Beisel, spokesman

for the Fraport board, spoke of a “general strike against all German air traffic.” The mayor of Gelsenkirchen, Karin Welge, who is representing the municipalities in the negotiations, described the strikes as “disproportionate” and claimed that collective wages in the public sector over the last 10 years have “risen faster than inflation.”

But airport workers are fully aware that big business and the politicians are shifting the crisis onto the backs of workers. They are ready to strike. The warning strikes called by Verdi are in fact the product of the workers’ great pressure on the union bureaucrats.

This was particularly clear in Stuttgart, where the strike of the two aviation security service providers FraSec and Securitas Aviation succeeded in paralysing the airport. However, Verdi did not organize a strike rally, although striking workers were gathered at the entrance of the airport.

Two Stuttgart Passenger Control employees, Sabina and Fatima, believed it was high time that their demands were met after more than two years of negotiations. They are on strike for an increase to the bonuses for night, Sunday, public holiday and Saturday shifts as well as a better collective bargaining scheme for overtime pay.

Both women said that they and their colleagues were ready to strike. “The work we do is very difficult,” they said. “It is impossible to plan your personal life. We have to work three weekends a month, which is a big burden. Also, we are often not allowed to take holidays, and those who have children can’t spend the school holidays with them.”

Savas, who also works in passenger control, was dissatisfied with Verdi. He said: “While the wage claim is 10 euros, we know in advance that everything has been agreed upon with the employer. In the end we’ll get €3 more. At the last wage increase, we got less than €1 per hour.”

Savas also said that he was completely against the war in Ukraine, and especially military support from Germany. War refugees must be housed and cared for, he added. “But tanks don’t bring peace, they just kill more civilians,” he commented. He also said the earthquake in Turkey could not simply be called a natural disaster. “So much death and destruction should have been prevented,” he said.

In Frankfurt, in addition to Fraport and FraCares employees,

a very large number of FraGround ground staff took part in the strike. They carry out bone-crushing work on the tarmac in all weather and for low wages. Many of them told the WSWs that they now have to pay significantly more for fuel, heating costs, food and other things than the official 10 percent inflation rate.

During the pandemic, the union agreed to waive pay increases under the collective agreement. Many workers were put on short-time work, a state-sponsored temporary layoff scheme, while thousands lost their jobs at the airport. Several workers told us that the 10.5 percent demanded by Verdi would not be enough for them. However, some of the low earners supported the demand for a minimum increase of €500. “We absolutely need this, and immediately, to pay our bills,” said one worker.

Usman, who has worked at FraCares for over five years, said: “Right now, all prices are going up—and wages are going to stay the same? This gap that has arisen must finally be compensated. €500 more a month is the minimum for us, but just 10 percent would not be enough.” Usman hoped “that the strike will now develop as well as it did in France.”

Usman said he did not believe that sanctions on Russia alone were driving prices higher. “That may be partly true, but everything is getting more expensive. This means that the situation is simply being exploited. This should not be the case,” he commented. Another colleague asked, “Are the bananas growing in Russia? Or the cauliflower? Why is it all twice as expensive?”

A Fraport worker reported that she had been at the airport for 33 years. “I experienced the times of the FAG (predecessor of Fraport) here, when the conditions were relatively stable,” she said. “Since then, much has changed for the worse.” She is particularly angry about raising the retirement age to 67. “I could go on strike immediately,” she said. She explained that her alarm clock wakes her at 1:45 a.m., and she doesn’t know how long she can do this hard work at the airport. “If we were paid better, more guys would start here. The board has no idea what we do here—or more correctly: they don’t care.”

Two FraGround workers, who introduced themselves with their nicknames “Memo” and “Eno,” reported: “10 percent, that’s not enough at all.” If they really got at least €500 a month more, then it would be worth talking about, they added.

“As ground transport services, which load and unload the machines, we operate under constant physical stress,” Memo noted. “I am married, am in tax class 4 and get a maximum of €2,100 a month. I have to work 180 or 190 hours. We get €12.50 or €13 net, but I pay €1,000 for the rent alone—how is that going to work?” A colleague reported that he had to carry around 2,000 suitcases a day.

Memo was laid off during the COVID crisis and was only reinstated last year at FraGround. Eno explained: “The last few years have hardly seen any change for us. We really need to get paid better! You hardly have any personal time when you work so much overtime: We work five days, have one day off, then we work seven days and have two days off. It is often very

irregular. We hardly see our family, we are constantly at work. Will anything change this time?”

Further warning strikes have been announced for the coming days, including in the states of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), Hesse and Baden-Württemberg. This will see strikes at the two major airports in NRW, Düsseldorf and Cologne/Bonn.

The second round of negotiations will then take place in Potsdam on February 22 and 23. Verdi leaders Frank Werneke and Christine Behle (both Social Democrats) will meet with the president of the Association of Municipal Employers’ Associations (VKA), Karin Welge, and with Federal Minister of the Interior Nancy Faeser, who are also both long-term SPD members. All four have known each other for many years and probably already know the rough outlines of the settlement.

In an n-tv interview, Verdi Secretary Mathias Venema said: “In the public service there are rituals. I hope we get a nice offer next week, and then we will accept that.”

In a leaflet for Frankfurt Airport, Verdi wrote: “The federal government and municipalities have still not understood what the current financial situation of their employees looks like, especially in the lower and middle pay groups.” This is of course nonsense. Leading politicians, businessmen and bankers, as well as the Verdi leaders themselves, have brought about these conditions and are doing everything they can to retain them.

This is underscored by the fact that the heads of Verdi, as well as the IG Metall union and the DGB (German Federation of Trade Unions), have participated in the concerted action since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, in which they discuss all essential issues with the business associations, the banks and the federal Ministry of the Economy. The concerted action’s aim is to impose the horrendous costs of rearmament, the consequences of the NATO offensive and the sanctions against Russia onto the working population. The union bureaucracies, with their network of functionaries, works councils and trustees, play a crucial role in keeping the working class under control.

The *World Socialist Web Site* therefore calls on workers to organize their own rank-and-file committees independently of Verdi and the other unions to prioritize workers’ lives over corporate profits. These committees must consist of the most trusted colleagues and will join forces with workers internationally to end capitalist exploitation and war on the basis of a socialist programme.



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