

Warning strikes in Germany's public sector and local transport

Our reporters
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On Friday, March 3, warning strikes were again held in Germany's public sector. In seven federal states—Bavaria, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Saxony—public transport operators in cities whose services have not yet been privatized went on strike. The previous day, in Bavaria, three strikes had taken place at refuse collection operations, materials yards and transport companies.

In negotiations, the representatives of the federal and local governments had presented a provocative offer that would impose cuts in real wages for public-sector employees. Since Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) announced a “new era” at the beginning of the Ukraine war, the political establishment and the corporations have ruthlessly sought to pass the costs of war and militarism onto the working class, while continuing to fuel the stock market boom. Germany's main trade unions are playing an important role in this. Behind the backs of the workers, the service sector union Verdi is preparing to stab the strikers in the back with a deal that is just barely above what was initially offered.

Together with the German Civil Service Federation (dbb), Verdi is deliberately organizing the warning strikes in a manner designed to keep the workers' growing militancy under control. To prevent a conflagration, the industrial action is being limited to small groups, separated by region and sector.

On Friday, Verdi decided to merge the strikes with the protests of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement. Joint rallies with the climate movement were organized in some 30 cities. The political issues related to the climate crisis, social cuts and the escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine were left out.

Instead of seeking to win the young workers, students and youth who want to fight against the destruction of the planet to a working class movement fighting across all borders against capitalism, social inequality and war, the FFF leadership and union bureaucracy are working together to prevent an independent movement and promote reactionary concepts.

What brings the leadership of Verdi and Fridays for Future together is not concern for wages or the environment, but support for NATO's war policies in Ukraine. A week ago, Luisa Neubauer of FFF spoke alongside the Green Party's Ralf Fücks and other warmongers at a rally at the Brandenburg Gate calling for arms deliveries to Ukraine. Both Verdi and FFF agree that the burden of war must be shifted onto the population.

Thus, the joint rallies served mainly to demobilize the strike movement. At the same time, wherever WSWS reporters spoke with strikers, the workers showed a great willingness to fight. The strikes were supported virtually across the board.

Nevertheless, the Verdi and FFF central rallies remained small and were sparsely attended by strikers. Verdi representatives limited themselves to toothless criticisms of the government. In Leipzig, for example, Verdi deputy leader Christine Behle denounced the climate-damaging promotion of highways by Transport Minister Claus Wissing of the Liberal Democratic Party.

In **Essen**, workers from the Ruhr cities of Oberhausen, Mülheim and Essen gathered at noon on Friday. Bus drivers from STOAG (Stadtwerke Oberhausen GmbH) made up one of the larger delegations mobilized by Verdi. The majority of the demonstrators consisted of supporters of the FFF movement.

We spoke with **Ahmed**, who has been a bus driver for STOAG in Oberhausen for about 10 years. He described his poor financial situation.

“Most of us have families, everything has become more expensive, especially energy costs and food... It can't go on like this,” he said. “They don't mind the price increases much, but for us it's extreme.” He said a 10 percent salary increase would help, adding, “It wouldn't be very good, because actually we would need more because of the high prices. But it would be better than nothing.”

Ahmed works at least two extra shifts a month just to make ends meet. “That's quite a lot spread out over the year,” he said. “Those are days when you don't see the family, and afterwards you're often dog tired, too. That takes it out of you.”

In the end, he lamented, “2,100 to 2,200 euros net remain [in my pay packet], because I'm on the late schedule. So, I don't really see anything from life, not even at home.” Compared to the work performed, it is definitely too little money, he noted. “We transport people, we always have to be there, and to be fit.”

Without extra shifts and late shifts, he would only earn 1,900 to 2,000 euros. That is far too little for a family, he said. “My wife has to work too. Otherwise, we can't manage at all. With my salary alone, I couldn't cover our costs.”

Ahmed pointed to the cost of the war. “When the war started, immediately the energy prices went up immensely,” he said.

Regarding the special fund of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), Ahmed asked, “From whose tax money are they being paid?” He answered, “From ours! We have not been asked if we are willing to finance the war with our money. No one asks us.”

He said he had little confidence in Verdi, and suspects that things are going on “behind the scenes.” He told the WSWS: “They should really do what we want and not always back down. But that hasn't been the case for a long time. Not much has happened there in the last 10 years.”

Ahmed concluded, “Actually, we are the wheel that turns

everything—we, the workers and taxpayers.” He said he was in favour of a long, serious strike, where everything stops, to really get something done.

In **Frankfurt**, WSWS reporters spoke with striking drivers and technicians at the streetcar depot behind the main train station. Horst, Esul and John, three colleagues from the technical department, commented on the offer made so far by the federal and local governments, which provides for a total wage “increase” of only 5 percent over a 27-month period, the first 3 percent of which will not arrive until October.

“We can’t be fobbed off with 3 percent,” Horst said. “We saw 10 percent inflation last year, and food and gasoline prices went up much more. The contract term cannot be longer than 12 months, because we don’t know what else is coming and what the situation will be like in a year’s time. Twenty-seven-month terms—that’s not going to work.”

John reported, “We have already experienced a lot with privatization at local public transport operator VGF. For example, bus services were privatized, and that got rid of a lot of what had seemed secure. On the private bus operations, new people have been hired on much worse conditions and less money.”

Only recently, his colleagues had learned that a wage demand of 15 percent had been raised at the post office, against the will of Verdi. “We should have done the same!” exclaimed John. “Ten percent as a demand is definitely too little,” because in the end there would be a significantly worse result. That, he said, was evident in the very fact that they dared to make a proposal where nurses would get nothing at all. “That’s really an impertinence,” John said.

Horst added, “These are the very people who did the most in the coronavirus pandemic, and they were applauded. Now we should turn the tables: Instead of the bosses getting bonuses, we’ll just clap for them, too. How’s that?”

The three technicians liked the international approach advanced in the WSWS statement on collective bargaining. “International cooperation is definitely important,” John said. “After all, the leading bosses have international networks.”

Two days of strikes were held in **Munich**. On Thursday, along with subway and streetcar drivers, refuse collection and materials yard workers walked off the job. On Friday, the transport companies in Nuremberg, Augsburg, Regensburg, Ingolstadt, Bamberg, and Bayreuth in Bavaria also went on strike for the whole day.

In Munich, too, only about 100 strikers took part in the Verdi strike meeting, which was held at a remote location that was difficult to reach. Here, Verdi officials invited several Munich city councillors from the SPD and the Left Party as speakers. However, these were met with scepticism and opposition. When Stefan Jagel, Verdi union secretary and a city councillor for the Left Party in Munich, said that he had to mobilize the workers so that they would “stay strong and continue to fight for better working conditions,” he was met with mockery and laughter in response.

In Munich, the WSWS spoke with Thomas, who works at Waste Management Munich (AWM). He immediately said he disagreed with the 10.5 percent wage demand, noting, “That doesn’t even cover inflation.” He added, “And in the end, it comes out less anyway. Because in the third round of negotiations, they will make a rotten compromise. It’s an outrage, and more colleagues will leave.”

In his forties and with many years of professional experience, Thomas also criticized Verdi for “always just calling out individual companies and industries, never all together” to strike. “You can’t win with that from the outset,” he said.

He mentioned the strikes in France, which he said were very large, and welcomed the initiative of the *World Socialist Web Site* to unite these struggles internationally and build rank-and-file action committees independent of Verdi.

In **Dresden**, workers at city transport operator DVB went on strike on Friday. In the morning, a rally was held at the Gorbitz depot before heading into the city for a joint protest with the Fridays for Future movement. In front of the Gorbitz depot, the head of Verdi, Frank Werneke, paraded as a “worker.” The same Werneke, a member of the SPD for decades, has been on Verdi’s national executive board for more than 20 years and also holds a high-paying supervisory board position at Deutsche Bank.

Several striking workers expressed little optimism when asked what they expected from the collective bargaining round. They clearly had no confidence that the third round of negotiations would produce a significantly better result. One said he hoped at least for an increase in the basic wage. One striking streetcar driver, who has been with the company for over 30 years, said matter-of-factly: “The result is a foregone conclusion. You don’t think anything is seriously being negotiated here, do you?”

A streetcar driver described the industrial action to the WSWS as follows:

“Here in Dresden, there was a high willingness to fight, and on Friday the entire public transport operation came to a standstill. However, many workers have no interest in the orchestrated noisy spectacle organised by Verdi. So only a tiny fraction from my depot went along to the first rally at the Gorbitz depot, where Verdi boss Frank Werneke spoke. There, not only Werneke, but also Lars Seiffert from the DVB board got the opportunity to feign some warm words for the—as both said—‘justified concern of the strikers,’ and praised the fair dealings with each other.

“Out of a total of 400 striking DVB workers, only about 100 had come. Afterwards, they continued to the city centre with six almost empty coaches, which Verdi had ordered for this purpose. There, barely 50 people took part in the rally held by Verdi in front of the Transport Museum. It is important to know that this place is quite remote from Dresden’s everyday life, so that the rally could have attracted the attention of at most a few tourists that morning. The suspicion was that Verdi wanted to hide rather than attract attention with a rally within sight of the city’s central traffic junctions.

“Shortly before I left, an SPD member was allowed to express his ‘solidarity.’ That was the crowning joke at the end. The SPD has been in government in Saxony for about 10 years, and in the federal government, SPD Chancellor Olaf Scholz created the ‘Concerted Action’ [bringing together government, employers and unions] to oppose ‘excessive’ wage demands. And every worker has known for decades that the ‘solidarity’ of the SPD, as well as any other parliamentary party, is pure hypocrisy.”



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