

Workers speak out during joint rail and public sector warning strike in Germany

Our reporters
29 March 2023

“Prices are exploding, you can see it when buying your daily needs. Wages just aren’t enough.” These are the words with which a Potsdam road construction worker expressed what is driving him and hundreds of thousands of his colleagues into struggle: “It can’t go on like this. It will have to really hurt [the employers] before anything moves.”

On Monday, the largest warning strikes in more than 30 years paralyzed local and long-distance transport, major airports and freight shipping. These involved many tens of thousands of railroad workers, bus, streetcar and subway drivers, technicians, maintenance and highway workers, airport ground services, security and counter personnel, as well as workers at the ports and highway maintenance facilities. National rail operator Deutsche Bahn was forced to shut down services nationwide, and local and long-distance public transport services went on joint strike in seven out of sixteen German states.

There were strikes at Munich, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Berlin, Hanover, Hamburg, and Bremen airports, and around 380,000 travellers were unable to take their flights nationwide. In Munich, the strike had already begun on Sunday and was extended to two days. At several airports, ground handling workers and security personnel from subcontractors and service providers such as WISAG also took part. “For years, we have hardly ever received higher bonuses, despite working overtime, Saturday, Sunday and holiday shifts. Yet we’re the ones who keep the whole operation running,” said a Munich ground service worker on broadcaster ARD’s midday news program.

In contrast to the workers’ great willingness to strike, the rallies organised by the unions did not come close to reflecting the extent of the walkout. Service union Verdi and the rail and transport union Eisenbahn-und Verkehrsgewerkschaft, (EVG) jointly organized small rallies of a few hundred participants each, at which union officials formed the majority and set the tone.

In Baden-Württemberg alone, at least 10,000 were on strike that day. In North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and elsewhere, canal locks important for transporting freight were also closed, such as the Münster lock on the Dortmund-Ems Canal, and the Duisburg-Meiderich and Friedrichsfeld locks on the Rhine-Herne Canal. In Saxony, on the other hand, Verdi ensured that road tunnel traffic on the Dresden-Prague autobahn route remained open despite a strike at Autobahn GmbH by emergency service workers.

The unions tried to “blow off steam” with the warning strikes while their leaders met with employers in Potsdam to negotiate the details of a sellout that had already been decided behind closed doors.

Verdi is holding final negotiations this week for the public sector on a collective bargaining agreement that will affect 2.5 million workers.

The union is officially demanding a 10.5 percent wage increase, or €500 a month for a term of twelve months. As for EVG, which is back in negotiations on April 24, its demand is similar: a 12 percent wage increase, or at least €650 a month, for a term of 12 months.

But EVG and Verdi are not at all serious about achieving even these goals. They are closely tied to the companies and governments and fear a real mobilization by workers just as much as the latter. At Deutsche Post, Verdi has just stalled a strike and backed the company’s provocative offer, which provides for severe cuts in real wages.

The offers from the federal and state government employers will also result in a months-long pay freeze this year and a contract lasting 27 months, during which there would only be a total of 5 percent more in both the public sector and the railroads. One-time “inflation compensation bonuses” are supposed to distract from this reduction in real wages. At best, they only plug the worst holes, but do not improve basic wages in the long term.

It is no coincidence that at the same time as the Potsdam negotiations with federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser (Social Democrat, SPD) were taking place in Berlin, a cabinet meeting of the “traffic light” coalition—SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens—was also taking place, where it was decided that all future spending increases for the military and the Ukraine war would have to be met strictly through savings elsewhere.

The union leaders are doing everything in their power to prevent an indefinite strike. For example, the deputy Verdi secretary for Baden-Württemberg, Maïke Schollenberger, said that the warning strike had, above all, “one goal: to shake the public sector employers awake in time to avoid a collective bargaining conflict lasting weeks or even months.” And the EVG leadership announced it was not planning to strike on the Easter holidays, in any case.

For Conny, Marco and Mario, three employees of local transit operator VGF (Verkehrsgesellschaft Frankfurt), who participated in the rally in front of Frankfurt’s main train station, an increase of monthly wages by at least €500 was especially important. “We have maintained life during the pandemic,” Mario said. “Now we have the energy crisis and inflation on top of that.” In a city like Frankfurt, he said, no one could manage that on their current salary. “Empty thanks are not enough for us,” Conny said. The previous offer was a “laughingstock,” she added.

Mario, who works as a technician, pointed out what needed doing so that a streetcar runs every day. “Public transport is self-evident—but skilled workers are lacking everywhere, the salary structure is simply not enough.” That’s the case for everyone, Conny added: “Even the salesclerks, nurses, railroad workers—everyone has a big

responsibility.” Referring to investments in armaments, Mario said, “All this money just doesn’t get to where it’s really needed anymore.”

The contrast between the unions’ negotiating goals and what workers need and expect was also clearly expressed elsewhere.

The largest rally and demonstration nationwide took place at the Congress Hotel on Lake Templin, the site of the negotiations, where Verdi, GEW (teachers), EVG and the GdP police union jointly mobilised about 2,000 strikers. Exclusively for Potsdam, Verdi had also called out staff at hospitals, nurseries and other companies on strike.

Although the rally there was dominated by union officials and shop stewards, who tried to prevent any discussion between union members and WSWs reporters, there were some open discussions. Several participants expressed broader demands and advocated a joint struggle with strikers in France.

Celine, a nurse at the Vivantes hospital since November 2021, said, “Since I started, it has gotten worse and worse. Many colleagues have been dismissed. The management doesn’t seem to care about the consequences for the staff and the patients. Colleagues are getting sick more and more often—for which they are also getting warnings.”

Asked about the events in France, Celine became animated and said she welcomed these strikes. Another nurse said in passing, “We here in Germany have quietly accepted retirement at 67. The French are real revolutionaries.” Celine explained, “Here in Germany, the strike policy is very lame. If you don’t stand up against the system, you don’t achieve anything. The German state is still very far-right, and people are massively exploited.”

Anja and Christine, two kindergarten teachers, said, “For us, it’s just about child minding, not about the actual educational mission anymore.” Things had been getting worse and worse, Anja reported. Today, there were two of them looking after 20 children, and as many as 25 children in the kindergarten. “Above all, I am on strike against these conditions,” said Anja.

Christine, who works in the after-school centre, confirmed this, and said, “I’m not only demanding more pay, which is understandable enough, there is also a massive lack of staff. It looks bad for the younger generation.” Instead of making the profession more attractive, unskilled labour was being used, she said. “Yet many start with us because they really care about the profession. And they have to pay for their own training.”

Regarding the strikes in France, Christine says, “I think it will happen here too. Everything is deteriorating. How can you achieve anything other than by striking? If the state assembly massively increases its own pay, that’s hardly newsworthy. But today, people are attacked in the media for striking for a few percent more pay.”

Two road construction workers, Michael and Alfons, employed at the construction yard in Potsdam, said that the demand for 10.5 percent more pay was the lowest limit. Actually, it should have been at least 15 percent. “Prices are exploding,” said Michael, who has been working there for 23 years and is about to retire. It was just not enough to manage any more, “Rents are insane,” he explained. “You really have to look hard to find a modest apartment in Potsdam under €1,000 a month.” Alfons pointed to a block of new buildings across from the Alter Markt in Potsdam: “These are all condominiums. A normal worker can’t afford something like that.”

Referring to the strikes in France, Michael said those workers were doing it right: “We’re letting ourselves be short-changed again.” He commented, “It’s an absolute cheek when you consider that a

pensioner gets €750-800 a month while gigantic bonuses are paid out to managers.” Asked about the fact that EVG officials were waving through exactly such massive bonuses on supervisory boards and were now leading the negotiations, Alfons agreed, “You’re right about that.” They both took a flyer from the independent action committee with interest.

Katrin, a long-time educator who had travelled from Dessau in Saxony-Anhalt to support the strike meeting, said, “The last time we went on an indefinite strike was in 2015—for four weeks at that time. That was only possible because we had the backing of parents, even though it was very difficult for them.”

Monday’s warning strike confirmed what the Public Service Action Committee wrote in a statement that was distributed at numerous demonstrations:

Our working conditions will only improve, and our wages can only be defended if the focus is not on war and profits, but on our needs. We can only fight for this ourselves and only independently of the union bureaucrats of Verdi.

The statement calls on workers to organize independently of the unions and to conduct the struggle together with their colleagues in France and other European countries. As Monday’s warning strikes in Germany show, through a large, indefinite strike on this basis, the working class is very capable of achieving its justified demands and much more. However, to conduct the struggle against the governments’ policies of cuts and war, workers need their own fighting organizations and a socialist perspective.

When asked about this, many workers reacted with interest, like Katrin, who said of the action committees: “That’s a good thing. At some point, you have to start thinking that way.” She had already resigned from Verdi two years ago, she said, “We no longer felt understood by Verdi. They just look after themselves.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact