

Truck drivers on strike for six weeks in Germany

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Since March 20, around 65 truck drivers have been on strike at the A5 service area Gräfenhausen in the central German state of Hesse. They are demanding full payment of their wages, which have been withheld from them for months. Their strike is an example of fighting determination, but it needs an independent perspective and the active support of workers in Germany and throughout Europe.

The truckers come from Georgia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. For five and a half weeks now, they have been on strike against Polish freight owner Łukasz Mazur, who operates the Agmaz, Lukmaz and Imperia transport chains. They carry goods across Europe on behalf of major corporations such as Volkswagen, Ikea, General Electric, DHL. The drivers are demanding not only their outstanding wages, but fair pay overall and decent working conditions.

For example, one young driver who recently joined the strike reported on Friday (showing his bank statements to journalists) that he has been on Europe's roads since November and has so far received a total of only €1,000 (US\$1,097) in wages—for five months' work! Another explained, "Theoretically, after five days on the road, I'm allowed to take a two-day break—and shower and sleep in a hotel. I have only dreamed of this for years. Instead, I've been living in four square meters in my driver's cab for months, far away from my family."

The strikers gave Mazur a deadline of noon last Friday to pay the outstanding wages. But he let it pass. When questioned by broadcaster ZDF, the Polish entrepreneur said he had fulfilled his contractual obligations and there would be no more money from him.

On Easter Friday, Mazur had initially tried, without success, to break the strike by force and to move the

trucks away from the service area using replacement drivers. When this failed, he agreed to transfer payments to individual drivers, but not in full and not for all of them. So far, he is said to have transferred a total of €200,000 for drivers in the 65-strong group, but €97,858 are still missing.

Speaking for the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) Fair Mobility Consulting Network, Anna Weirich confirmed the carrier has not only withheld a lot of money from the drivers, but also the usual contractual documents. Weirich, who speaks Russian, regularly assists on site with negotiations over the phone (while journalists and visitors usually use different translation tools to communicate with the strikers).

Edwin Atema of the Dutch trade union FNV, who is leading the negotiations for the truck drivers, has also confirmed that the drivers have not received any papers, accounts or documents. "It's like modern human trafficking," Atema said.

Every day, supporters and travellers arrive at the truck stop, bring cakes or other food, give cigarettes to the strikers. Italian truckers have recorded a video to support their striking colleagues in Gräfenhausen.

But disputes continue to occur, such as last week when the General Electric company threatened to have its cargo, which was in one of the trucks, picked up by police. The freight forwarder LOG contacted the South Hesse police about the matter and announced a reloading action on Friday, April 21, at 2:00 p.m. When the strikers made clear their determination to prevent the release of the goods, the action was called off again, for the time being.

However, this shows how explosive the conflict can become and how urgent its expansion is. The drivers can rely neither on the German police nor the unions.

They can only wage their struggle by mobilizing other drivers and workers in their defence.

The Hesse IG Metall and Verdi union officials are feigning “solidarity” with the striking truckers and are organizing material and medical support together with the churches. But at the same time, they deliberately isolate the strike and hope it will peter out.

The DGB unions are afraid that the truckers’ strike will spread and want to prevent a larger strike movement at all costs. They have just demonstrated this in the contracts agreed for postal workers and in the public sector. Despite a great willingness to fight by workers, they are in the process of imposing a rotten sell-out on public sector workers. The union bureaucracies are doing everything they can to separate the labour struggles in Germany from the resistance in France against Macron’s pension cuts.

The trade unions in contact with the strikers are not appealing to their own members in Hesse to take up joint industrial action against exploitation, rather they are appealing to the capitalist corporations for which the truckers drive. They call on companies like VW, Ikea or Deutsche Post DHL, which use Polish trucking directly or indirectly, to comply with the law and take “responsibility”.

Coming from the unions, such appeals are not only toothless, but cynical and mendacious. The unions are directly responsible for the foul conditions of exploitation. In Germany, the unions not only helped introduce the “Hartz“ laws, which have condemned millions of workers and their families to abject poverty; they collaborate with government and big business to devise the mechanisms through which the attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions are enforced.

Under EU regulations, and according to the supply chain law that has been in effect in Germany since January, corporations are also responsible for the conditions and wages of subcontracted drivers. However, when asked by several newspapers, the corporations flatly denied working with ?ukasz Mazur at all. They hide behind an inscrutable jungle of subcontractors and dummy companies, etc. As news weekly *Der Spiegel* writes, “The case sheds light on an industry that is regulated within the EU but whose rules are undermined by deals with subcontractors and by wage differentials.” It added, “The chain of subcontractors often becomes so complicated that it is

hard to trace.”

The drivers do not want to end their strike until everyone has received their money in full. At the strikers’ press conference Friday afternoon, one driver said they would go on hunger strike, if necessary, until their demands were met. “We are not afraid now,” said another trucker.

What the drivers need is a rank-and-file action committee to link their struggle—independently of Verdi, IG Metall and the entire DGB—with that of their fellow truckers across the industry and in the European working class. It is the only way their determination to fight can lead to a real improvement in conditions.



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