

Workers' resistance grows in Germany amid layoffs, cuts in real wages and exploitation

Marianne Arens
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There is a victory mood at the Gräfenhausen motorway service area where the 65 truck drivers who have been on strike for six weeks have succeeded in getting their wages paid. They are an example of the growing resistance in the working class.

On Wednesday, Polish freight forwarder Lukas Mazur signed an agreement in which he “undertakes to transfer all outstanding payments to the drivers' accounts.” It added: “No legal action will be taken against the drivers.” Previously, Mazur had used private security operatives and the police in several attempts to forcibly retrieve the trucks and the goods they contained, but these had all failed due to the determined solidarity of the drivers. The men, who are mainly from Georgia and Uzbekistan, had declared that they wanted to stay together “until the last man gets his money.”

Their strike has clearly shown the great willingness to fight that is spreading in the working class, as well as the disastrous working conditions that EU policies have wrought in the European transport sector. To overcome them and to really change conditions requires more than a spontaneous readiness to fight. It requires building our own working-class organs, united in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This was one of the issues raised Sunday at the ICFI's online rally to celebrate May Day 2023.

The central mission of the independent action committees is to break the control and repression of labour struggles by the union bureaucracy. As the founding declaration of the IWA-RFC states, it will lead a “global counteroffensive of the working class' against decades of social counterrevolution, imperialist wars, the coronavirus pandemic and growing threat of fascism and dictatorship. It will enable workers to exchange information, plan joint actions, network and unite workers across workplaces, sectoral and national boundaries, unleashing “the full force of the entire working class.”

The need to build independent action committees has been demonstrated in recent strikes at Deutsche Post, the railroads and in the public sector. There, the Verdi union has called off strikes at short notice, isolated ongoing labour struggles and separated them from their international colleagues, and finally sold out these struggles. This is all done in the interests of the “German economy,” they say, really meaning in the interests of the capitalists and the government's pro-war policy. In the

transport sector at the end of March, 150,000 workers had taken part in a “mega-strike” before Verdi then accepted a conciliation agreement imposing cuts in real wages. At Deutsche Post DHL, 86 percent of union members had voted in favour of an indefinite strike, but Verdi prevented it at the last minute by reaching a fraudulent wage settlement that also included cuts in real wages.

However, the conflicts remain unresolved, and the anger about the intolerable working conditions in hospitals, nursing homes, kindergartens or at Deutsche Post continues to grow. For example, an offer from Mainz University Hospital was unanimously rejected by union members, and another warning strike announced for May 4 and 5. At national rail operator Deutsche Bahn, the conflict remains unresolved even after the second nationwide warning strike. In the public sector and at Deutsche Post, workers have begun to set up action committees to push their struggle forward.

In the meantime, there is a willingness to strike everywhere, even among workers in precarious employment who have not been very visible so far. One recent example was at delivery service Lieferando, where riders went on strike for the first time in April to push through an hourly wage of €15. Delivery drivers are subjected to miserable working conditions, low wages, and hire-and-fire policies on the streets of major cities. Previously, there have been labour disputes at Gorillas and Getir.

On April 14, the same Friday as the Lieferando riders took action, IKEA workers in seven cities in North Rhine-Westphalia also went on strike. IKEA staff are fighting back against massive overwork caused by staff shortages. This in turn is a result of low pay and high sick absences due to heavy workloads—problems that are also rampant in the public sector. Shortly before, Amazon workers had also gone on strike again over the Easter weekend to fight for fair wages and against exploitation, stopping work in Winsen near Hamburg, Bad Hersfeld, Rheinberg and Koblenz.

Another group of workers that had seen little strike action so far is temporary workers. At the end of March, workers at VW's personnel services provider Autovision held a warning strike. These workers, who toil for low wages, receive no vacation and Christmas bonuses, unlike their permanent

colleagues, and had also gone empty-handed so far regarding the “inflation compensation” payment of €3,000. As a result, at the end of March, around 2,000 temporary workers at the VW plants in Hanover, Osnabrück and Emden took part in a warning strike.

In a very short time, the IG Metall union concluded a new contract for these workers to forestall a spillover of the struggle to the permanent VW workers. The new contract provides for raising the low wages, some of which were previously even below the minimum wage at €10.84 (!), to €13.50 in two steps by December. The €3,000 inflation compensation payment will be granted, but not the vacation and Christmas bonuses. In this respect, the workers are being put off with talk of “further negotiations.”

The great haste with which the agreement was concluded can be explained by the fact that the entire automotive and supplier industry is seething now that the transformation to e-mobility is in full swing. Technical progress is not being used to improve the conditions of the working class, but the transformation is to be carried out entirely at the expense of the workers.

Mercedes-Benz, for example, has already announced major job cuts at its engine and transmission plants, citing the transition to e-mobility and digitalization. Without giving specific figures, Chief Human Resources Officer Sabine Kohleisen told dpa: “It will be the case that we will have less employment at these sites.” For the past year, Mercedes-Benz has been shifting production more and more to a “luxury strategy,” in which essentially only the particularly expensive models will be built in Germany.

At the same time, the enrichment of those at the top of the auto companies exceeds any measure: Ola Källenius, Mercedes-Benz CEO, for example, collected no less than seven million euros last year. VW boss Oliver Blume received €7.4 million and BMW boss Oliver Zipse €7.9 million. Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares was considered the top earner in the European auto industry, collecting three times that amount, according to finance daily *Handelsblatt*. Tavares received no less than €23.5 million for last year in salary and bonuses.

Meanwhile, the car companies are shifting a large part of the problems onto the supplier sector. Bosch, for example, still has 27,000 employees at ten German locations, and many are dependent on combustion engine technology. A jobs’ massacre is being prepared, and management is currently in talks with the central works council and the IG Metall about how to implement the job cuts. ZF Friedrichshafen is also facing a job massacre with the elimination of 6,000 jobs.

Automotive supplier Brose has reacted to financial losses by threatening to drastically cut costs in all areas—logistics, administration, and production. In a statement, owners and shareholders berated the Brose workforce for lacking “motivation.” The mood is also bad at the car dealerships and workshops, where more than 15,000 employees took part in nationwide warning strikes in the automotive trade at the

beginning of April.

These are just a few examples of how tense the situation is in many workplaces today. While the government is increasingly switching to a war economy and top managers and works council representatives are threatening more job cuts, workers are less and less willing to accept the growing workload and cuts in real wages. In this situation, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) advocates that in all industries any change must be in the interests of workers. Its latest statement reads:

If EVs require 40 percent fewer labor hours to build, then the workweek should be reduced from the exhausting 40, 50 and even 60 hours workers routinely labor to 30 hours a week, with no loss in pay. Just as wages must rise automatically with the increase in the price of consumer goods, the number of working hours must be adjusted so available work is divided among all workers with no loss in income.

The corporations and their UAW “partners” have their strategy to impoverish the working class and enrich themselves, the statement continues. “But rank-and-file workers are developing their own strategy and building new centers of power in the factories to fight for it.” In doing so, they must prepare for a struggle to establish working-class control over jobs, hiring and firing, and over all production.

The statement concludes with an urgent appeal, “There is not a moment to lose. If you agree with this, set up a rank-and-file committee in your workplace.” The global May Day 2023 online rally elaborated on this perspective.



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