

Long distance truck drivers take renewed strike action in Germany

Marianne Arens
27 August 2023

For the past six weeks, dozens of truck drivers have taken renewed strike action at the A5 motorway service station, Gräfenhausen in the state of Hesse, in southwest Germany. The truckers are determined to force their employer, the Polish haulier [US: hauler] Lukasz Mazur, to pay out long outstanding wages.

The courageous wage struggle by Eastern European drivers deserves the support of all German workers. It shines a harsh light on the slave-like conditions that still prevail for thousands of long-distance drivers on Europe's roads in the 21st century.

The strike began on July 18 when four blue trucks were parked in protest at Gräfenhausen. The number quickly spread to well over a hundred trucks. There are presently 87 trucks at the Gräfenhausen-West rest area alone, more are parked on the east side, and the trucks can also be seen at surrounding rest areas. They bear company names like "Agmaz", "Lukmaz" and "Imperia," all belonging to the same haulier.

The trucks, parked in long rows close together, have loaded parts for the German auto companies Porsche and BMW, plus deliveries of French wine, Red Bull soft drinks and other goods. Several empty trucks are used as improvised kitchens, offices or meeting and recreation rooms. There is even a makeshift shower.

"This strike is much bigger than the first one in April," declare the drivers, who come from Georgia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, plus two drivers from Ukraine. "We will stay until the last one of us has received his money," Shukhrat Karimov from Uzbekistan tells us, and his colleagues agree.

Shukrat's family lives 5,000 km away in the Uzbek city of Paxtakor. He reports: "My brothers have to take care of the family now. I am still owed 5,300 euros from Lukasz Mazur. Only then can I send them money

again."

Shukrat has been working for Imperia for a year. To begin with, he says, things were a bit better, but "not once have I received my full salary and recently the situation has been getting worse all the time." Many drivers have not received payment since May with their employer stalling and making excuses.

The drivers are not permanently employed by Lukasz Mazur, but work for him via so-called service contracts under Polish law. They sit behind the wheel for nine, 10 or more hours a day. Although they would be entitled to take a two-day break after five days on the road and to shower and sleep in a hotel, their lives are confined to the driver's cabin. As Shukhrat said, "We live in the van and sleep in the van, even on weekends."

Already in April this year, long-distance drivers from the same haulage company went on strike at this service station for six weeks against unpaid wages. Finally, under pressure from suppliers, the haulage company relented and paid out. Almost all of the drivers affected subsequently resigned.

This time, the drivers are all different, except for one Georgian who had took part in the first strike. Apparently, Mazur systematically uses the exploitation of drivers from Central Asia and the Caucasus as a business model, because their driving licences are not recognised in Germany and other EU countries and they can only officially work for the company in Poland.

The freight company owes the strikers over half a million euros in total, as is documented on long lists on the wall of their mobile "office."

During the first strike in April, Mazur tried to hijack the trucks using a private militia with an armoured car to physically force the drivers away and replace them

with strikebreakers. In the event, the Hessian police intervened to prevent this from taking place.

This time, the employer, through its lawyers, has charged the drivers with coercion at the Darmstadt public prosecutor's office. In the meantime, the Polish labour inspectorate is alleged to have carried out an inspection on the premises of the huge haulage company, resulting in fines imposed on Mazur.

The Mazur group maintains a fleet of about 1,000 trucks that transport goods and production parts for various corporations across Germany and the EU. The German companies they drive for have all officially signed up to International Labour Organisation standards, aimed at ensuring workers' rights throughout the supply chain. In reality, the employers have not the slightest concern for the drivers' working conditions.

The drivers, however, who have been on strike for six weeks now, are determined not to be divided. They do not want to end the strike until all of them—those with valuable cargo as well as those with empty trucks—have been paid in full. They are receiving considerable support from other truckers, many of whom honk their horns as they drive by to express their solidarity.” You always see drivers from other companies stopping here to support us,” Uzbek drivers report. One truck driver spontaneously organised a fundraiser for them.

Support of various kinds also comes from people living in the area, some of whom even help with laundry. “Write down that we want to thank the German people,” stresses a striking colleague.

As was the case during the last strike, German unions in southern Hesse are supporting the strikers with food and water. Once again Edwin Atema, a transport workers' representative from the Dutch trade union FNV, heads the negotiations with Mazur on behalf of the truck drivers. Interpreters from the Fair Mobility Network also take turns to translate for and advise the strikers.

However, the unions are carefully avoiding doing what is actually necessary: publicising the strike among workers in Germany and all over Europe and mobilising support among the workforces of those companies affected by the strike, together with the working class as a whole. The reason for this refusal on the part of the unions is clear: as defenders of capitalism and as an extended arm of governments, the

trade unions are themselves partly responsible for the insidious forms of exploitation. One of their main tasks is to prevent a widespread strike movement that could quickly take the form of a political struggle of the working class against exploitation, oppression and war.



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