Warning strike in German local public transit:

Break the stranglehold of the Verdi union! Build independent action committees!

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Following the strikes by train drivers that ended Monday, doctors at university hospitals on Tuesday and airport security staff on Thursday, tens of thousands of bus, train, and tram drivers from local public transit companies across Germany are stopping work for a full day today. This is the first nationwide warning strike since 1992 and is taking place in 81 major cities and 42 municipalities.

Verdi is reacting to the growing anger of employees over intolerable working conditions and low wages. The union is negotiating in all federal states with the exception of Bavaria on collective working conditions agreements in local transport, and in some federal states also on the collective wage agreement.

The transit workers' warning strike is part of a swelling wave of strikes and protests against the rapid price increases and the loss of real wages. Added to this are intolerable working conditions, which are causing many employees to fall ill or give up their jobs, exacerbating work stress.

Militant protests by farmers are also taking place and--like the wage struggles--are spreading across Europe and into other countries. Demonstrations against war and the genocide in Gaza, against the AfD and the political shift to the right are continuing.

In this situation, Verdi has pulled out all the stops to ensure that a nationwide strike in public transport does not coincide with the strike by the 25,000 staff at the airports and certainly not with the train drivers. A joint struggle by these workers would have acted as a beacon and triggered a broad mobilisation against the hated federal coalition government.

While many workers are in favour of such a general strike movement and consider it necessary to counter the constant attacks by the corporations, municipal employers and government, Verdi, the GDL train drivers' union (which abruptly called off its national strike) and all other unions take the opposite view. They are closely aligned with the government and the companies. They demand the corporations boost competitiveness, support the military build-up and have agreed with the government that the costs of the war must be passed on to working people through cuts in real wages.

This support for the government determines their strike tactics. The wage disputes are not linked together to develop the greatest possible force, but strikes are separated from each other, isolated and limited to a few hours and suppressed as quickly as possible--according to the motto "Every man dies alone!".

The transit warning strike must be used to discuss a fundamental reorientation and reorganisation of the labour movement. It is important to set up independent rank-and-file action committees that are democratically organised in which a perspective is discussed that focuses on the fundamental defence of workers' interests. This means that the rights and needs of workers and their families must take precedence over the profit interests of companies, shareholders and speculators and the government's pro-war policy.

Part of such a reorientation must be close international cooperation. All problems today take on an international form. Workers all over the world face the same or similar problems and can only solve them through international co-operation and the co-ordination of cross-border struggles.

The close connection--not to say fusion--of the trade unions with the government takes on a pronounced form in municipal, state and federally owned companies and corporations. It is not uncommon for trade union officials to be given lucrative company positions. Union

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bureaucrats often sit on both sides of the negotiating table during collective bargaining in the public sector and in municipal corporations--usually with the same party affiliation. Their symbiotic relationship between the establishment parties and the state is why the trade unions regard their task as stifling and preventing the broad social, industrial and political mobilisation that is emerging.

This is clear in the current warning strike by transit workers, especially in one of Europe's largest public transport companies, the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG). Negotiations are underway on a contract covering around 16,000 workers. Although Verdi negotiator Jeremy Arndt reported a "constructive atmosphere" after the first meeting on Wednesday, the employers' side had neither made an offer of their own nor even commented on Verdi's demands.

The far too low demands presented by Verdi in Berlin reflect the terrible working conditions of BVG employees. The union is demanding 33 instead of 30 days' holiday, a "ten-minute" turnaround time in the driving service (instead of the current four minutes), an increase in rest periods from 11 to 12 hours between shifts and a reduction in unpaid breaks from the current 50 minutes to a maximum of 30 minutes in a maximum shift of 8.5 hours. Verdi in Berlin is also demanding an increase in the allowance for split shifts, which workers want to see abolished. This means they have to work three to four hours early in the morning and then again in the afternoon or evening for three or four hours. Other demands include an additional day's holiday after 100 hours of night work and the reintroduction of "holiday pay", only amounting to €500 per year.

The situation at BVG, as in all other transport companies, is unbearable. Thousands of jobs for drivers and technical staff go unfilled. Those who are doing their utmost to keep public transit running are becoming ill. For example, a BVG staff council member told the *Berliner Zeitung* that the "sickness rate used to be 6.5 percent, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic it was around 8.5 percent. It is currently officially 12 to 13 percent. In December, for example, it was actually more than 20 percent. On one day, more than 150 of the 572 employees here at Hof Britz depot were sick. A record!"

Resistance is growing against worsening conditions, which are not limited to transport companies, but extends to all industries and sectors.

And Verdi is trying to stop it. In Berlin, the Verdi strike leaders decided not to strike for the entire day at BVG, as is the case nationwide, but only from 3.00am to 10.00am.

In a video statement, Verdi official Arndt felt compelled to respond to workers' displeasure at this division. In the state of Berlin, a seven-hour strike was sufficient, she said, because "we have not yet had to deal with an employer side that is seeking massive deterioration within the contract for employees".

This is a whitewash. The BVG has pushed through "massive deteriorations" in the past, will continue to do so in the future and has probably already worked out with Verdi how this is to be done.

Verdi and the BVG board agree that workers should pay for rearmament and war. On the fringes of the last Verdi congress in September, national chairman Frank Werneke declared: "I am absolutely in favour of creating a special fund [for the Armed Forces]. This is necessary and €100 billion will probably not be enough by far."

Last year, postal workers, public sector employees at federal, state, city, and municipal level as well as the members of the EVG rail union at Deutsche Bahn showed that they were no longer prepared to accept this. With this year only just beginning, farmers, train drivers, doctors, airport workers and now local public transport workers are also showing they are willing to stand up and fight for their interests.

To be successful, new independent fighting organisations are needed. Rank-and-file action committees that are independent of the unions and solely committed to the workers and their families must be founded to oppose the common front of the trade unions, the government, and the corporations.

What the Rail Action Committee declared in a resolution passed on Tuesday also applies to public transit workers: "Our allies are neither the trade union apparatus nor the establishment parties. Our allies are the workers in all sectors and in all countries."

We call on all transit workers and in other sectors: Build independent action committees in your workplaces with trusted colleagues. Get in touch with the transport workers' action committee in Berlin. Send a WhatsApp message to +491633378340.

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