

Striking bus and tram drivers in Germany demand expansion of their strike

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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers at the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG, Berlin Transit Company) in Wilmersdorf Friday about making the one-day nationwide public transit warning strike they were participating in the starting point of a joint struggle by all workers against wage cuts and war. Transit workers in over 80 cities across the country participated in the strike.

The Verdi trade union, which is negotiating a “collective agreement for wage relief” with the municipal transport companies, organized a media event in front of the Cicerostrasse bus depot at which some students associated with Verdi and the “Fridays For Future” environmental group also appeared. In view of widespread skepticism towards the Verdi bureaucracy—which only last summer imposed real wage reductions on public service and postal workers—Green politician Luisa Neubauer also participated to provide public support for the officials in their secret negotiations with the BVG.

The leaflet distributed by WSWS reporters warned that Verdi and all other union bureaucracies consider it their job to “stifle and prevent the broad social, industrial and political mobilization that is emerging.” One bus driver responded by saying, “The seven-hour warning strike is a joke. Even our passengers have already shrugged off our campaign as a ‘breakfast strike.’”

Another colleague also criticized Verdi’s alibi measures in Berlin, saying: “There was a real strike by the GDL [train drivers’ union], but with us it’s not even a drop in the ocean—more like half a drop, if at all. We have no influence on the outcome of the negotiations, but we are not in the union either, because we don’t expect much from them anyway.”

Last week, the GDL called off a strike, initially

scheduled for six days, after five days and agreed to a sellout. Verdi and GDL agree that a joint struggle between train drivers and other transport workers must be prevented under all circumstances.

On the other hand, the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, initiated by the WSWS, unanimously passed a resolution on Tuesday “to extend a hand to colleagues in local transport and airports” and “to break through the control of the trade union apparatus.” The resolution went on to say: “Our allies are neither the trade union apparatus nor the parliamentary parties. Our allies are the workers in all industries in all countries.”

The leaflet stated that the rights and needs of workers and their families “must be higher than the profit interests of companies, shareholders and speculators and the Federal Government’s war policy.”

Although workers are prohibited from speaking to the press at strike events, several tram and bus drivers told the WSWS about their working conditions and called for a joint struggle of all transport workers, which also includes passengers.

“I have worked in the hotel industry for 16 years, but what I have experienced in transit at the BVG in the last four years dwarfs that,” said a worker who requested to remain anonymous. “The BVG draws up timetables that they already know will have you arriving late in traffic in Berlin and having to sacrifice your break to catch up. At the same time, however, you are ‘responsible’ for observing break times.”

Under these conditions, drivers only have the choice of permanently driving late or driving under exhaustion and thus increasing the risk of accidents “at their own risk.”

He concluded, “Cooperation must be established. We don’t strike against the passengers, there are reasons why so many buses are canceled. People who are

highly motivated leave the company because the frustration is so great. That's why we're here today—if it stays this way, this is just a meat grinder: The BVG crams them in at the top, forces them through the meat grinder and then they're gone. They are good at fine-tuning statistics and presenting themselves well. But instead of investing in the performance of the system, the board prefers to have a BVG musical produced. Of 50 people who start with us, just five are still with us after five years.”

Malik (mid-50s) also a bus driver, has already signed to support the participation of the SGP (Socialist Equality Party) in the European elections and had read the WSWS article early in the morning. He commented: “I have no faith in Verdi. They did not hold a meeting to determine our demands or coordinate our strike tactics. It's like with IG Metall, the unions are no longer what they used to be decades ago—on the contrary: Verdi is run like a company, like an insurance company. The opinion of bus and tram drivers falls by the wayside. The compromises that are negotiated in collective bargaining have made our working conditions even worse.

“I used to work for a metal company for eight years and was a member of the IG Metall. But after we got no support from the union there and everything went through the regional headquarters of IG Metall, I resigned. In other countries, too, such as Turkey, the trade unions are almost nothing more than jokes. As a bus driver, I have not yet seen a works council that would have taken care of my situation.

“I feel that the whole political system in Germany is somehow going backwards. Not even a Berlin election can be properly held, as you can see from the repeat election.”

Ritchie, who started as a bus driver in 2019 and previously worked in the catering industry for many years, said, “I would like to see more solidarity in society. In theory, not only would BVG employees have to strike, passengers would also have to take to the streets. A revolutionary people with the mentality of the French would have to emerge. Then a greater pressure would arise and then something would happen. The company is a capitalist—if the shop is closed for just a few hours, the company may even save money. We all have to take to the streets, otherwise nothing will happen here.”

When asked about the fact that the Bundeswehr (German army) special fund of over €100 billion should actually be used as a first step to finance the education, social and transport systems, Ritchie said, “That's an interesting point. I was in the Bundeswehr and even volunteered for a foreign assignment at the time. But my person has changed in such a way that I would agree. You cannot make peace through force of arms and it is always about getting the raw materials cheap. In Africa, people are bombed and houses set on fire in order to build a mine where children work. Some exploit this, sit at home in their city villas and make a killing out of it.”

Ritchie's colleague Marcel agreed with him, stating, “I was in the Bundeswehr for two years and I don't think any kind of war should be allowed to happen. There are always people who make money from it.”

Marcel works for the BVG subsidiary Berlin Transport (BT), which was founded by the Group in 1999 in order to be able to conclude employment contracts with lower wages. He continued, “In the past, they pushed for more output. Now they have reduced the frequency a bit, but with the same staffing level. I started here with a net income of €1,600. Last year, we received a wage increase of 1.4 percent, which was not even the compensation for inflation. Many colleagues had to make additional payments. The second installment is only coming this month and I believe that unless something fundamentally changes, many will leave.”

Marcel said of Verdi's role, “Verdi's strike funds are full, they could strike for half a year if they wanted to. The last time we went on strike in 2019, the company said to us during its last week: ‘Every day you go on strike, we save money.’ What kind of strike is this?”

We call on all workers at the BVG and beyond: establish independent rank-and-file committees in your companies with trusted colleagues. Contact the Berlin Transport Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Write a Whatsapp message to +491633378340.



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