

On Verdi: Lufthansa's "house union"

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When around 7,000 Lufthansa ground staff walked off the job at 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, February 7, the power of the working class was demonstrated once again. Around 900 takeoffs and landings had to be cancelled at Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Munich airports, affecting up to 100,000 passengers. At Rhein-Main Airport, the location of Lufthansa's base and main hub, 600 takeoffs and landings—90 percent of planned flights—were cancelled.

The Lufthansa warning strike was one of five strikes in just two weeks. It came shortly after the train drivers' strike, the airport security warning strike and the nationwide strike day in local public transport, as well as a week before the most recent airport strike at Erfurt-Leipzig Airport. Some media, including *Der Spiegel*, suggested that the right to strike should be restricted, as the stoppages were "holding the country hostage." The "strikes on the railways and at airports have triggered a debate on whether the power of strikers should be curbed. There are ways to do this," wrote *Der Spiegel*.

Other business representatives, including Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr and Chief Human Resources Officer Michael Niggemann, prefer to rely on collaboration with the service union Verdi—because it does not want industrial action. The union is using the warning strikes to "let off steam" and gain space for its undisturbed collaboration with management. Negotiations have been taking place behind closed doors again since February 11.

Lufthansa is a prime example of the role played by Verdi. It has long ceased to act as a representative of the workers, but as a corporatist agency of German aviation. Its works council representatives and union secretaries behave like well-paid agents of management in order to push down labour costs and facilitate job cuts. Lately, they have also been ensuring the smooth implementation of the German government's pro-war policy.

This has caused unrest and anger to spread among the airport ground workers. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Lufthansa cut staff on a massive scale with Verdi's help and cancelled holiday pay and Christmas and other bonuses. Since then, war-related inflation has further eroded wages. Although the airports have long been busy again, nothing is the same as it was four years ago.

Everyday necessities have become significantly more expensive than the general inflation rate would suggest. According to figures from the Federal Statistical Office, food prices in January 2024 were 33.3 percent higher than in January 2020, while heating costs and petrol were 47.6 percent higher. General inflation during this period was 17.6 percent. In the same period, the general wages level fell by 4 percent. This trend is even more pronounced at Lufthansa.

The company is flourishing. It recorded large profits in the second half of 2023. CEO Carsten Spohr raved about the "highest turnover and profit ever achieved in a summer—including an operating profit of €1.5 billion in the third quarter alone."

In contrast, the offer by Lufthansa to its employees is a provocation.

What is officially presented as a "13 percent increase in salary" initially includes an eight-month pay freeze, until August 2024. From September there is to be a gross increase of €200, from April 2025 another 3 percent, and then—only from April 2026—a further 2.5 percent. The contract is to run for 36 months, from January 1, 2024 to December 31, 2026.

Even the Verdi demand (12.5 percent, at least €500 more per month for a 12-month contract term) does not come close to meeting workers' current needs. Even in the highly unlikely event that it were fully implemented, it would not compensate for the losses suffered or the current high demands placed on staff. A year and a half ago, in July 2022, Verdi immediately dropped its wage demand of 9.5 percent for 12 months and settled for a fraction of this when the first warning strikes showed a great willingness to strike by airline workers.

Since then, the persistently high sickness rate—the coronavirus pandemic is not over!—continues to cause acute staff shortages. There are repeated bottlenecks, long queues at check-in and baggage losses and chaos in the terminals. The staff, who mostly work in shifts at the airport, are under constant stress. One baggage handler said during the warning strike: "We have 50 percent fewer employees than before coronavirus, but the work has remained the same. We should actually be demanding even more."

On February 7, Verdi negotiator Marvin Reschinsky confirmed that Lufthansa had "borrowed money from staff during the coronavirus pandemic that they now don't want to pay back." He added, "Employees have 10 percent less in their pockets today than three years ago." What Reschinsky did not say was that none of this would have been possible without the agreement of Verdi.

During the pandemic, the Verdi leadership, together with other union officials, sent a declaration of loyalty to the Lufthansa Executive Board stating: "We are addressing you together today to assure you of our support for all measures necessary to stabilise our company in these difficult times." The sectoral unions UfO, Vereinigung Cockpit and IGL also signed and have adhered to this declaration.

Based on this, the airline was able to start reorganising the company according to plans that senior management had long been keeping in their desk drawers. Jobs were cut, workers' gains destroyed, subsidiaries were sold off: Germanwings was wound up and LSG Sky was sold. While the global corporation had 138,350 employees in 2019, the year before the pandemic, there were over 30,000 fewer in 2022, with 107,970 employees. Even at the beginning of 2024, Lufthansa still had around 20,000 fewer employees than four years ago, despite the new economic boom.

Verdi also helped to push through long-held redundancy plans at partner and supplier companies (Fraport, WISAG, Handling Counts, etc.). When the airport services provider WISAG announced mass redundancies in December 2020, Verdi did not lift a finger. Those

affected organised themselves under the slogan “Today it is us—tomorrow you” and even went on hunger strike. WISAG workers laid a black funeral wreath in front of Verdi’s Frankfurt headquarters to symbolise that the Lufthansa “house union” was dead to them.

At Lufthansa Technik, which has been severely reduced through job cuts and closures during the pandemic, new hires are now being made in line with the German government’s pro-war policy. Lufthansa Technik has become a technical support provider and military outfitter for the German Air Force.

The trade unions helped to wind up the LH Technik sites in Bremen, Düsseldorf, Hanover and Leipzig on December 31, 2021, and there were job cuts in Hamburg and Frankfurt. Since then, employment has been on the upswing, which is increasingly geared towards the needs of the German Armed Forces. Lufthansa Technik even wants to build a new plant, as reported by *aero-telegraph*. LH Technik writes: “Together with the soldiers of the Bundeswehr [Armed Forces] and our NATO partners, we guarantee maximum operational availability.”

As usual, what this means is concealed—namely the future bombing of housing estates, exploding and collapsing urban residential areas, people burnt, beaten to death, buried under rubble, and mutilated and dead children. The focus on arms production and weapons transport is a focus on the third world war, including the slaughter of the civilian population, as is currently being seen in Gaza.

Not a word of this can be found in the official texts. Lufthansa Technik wants to ensure “that armed forces and governments receive aircraft that are optimally adapted for their missions and operations.” In particular, Lufthansa Technik is working together with Boeing and ESG on the first P-8A “Poseidon” maritime patrol aircraft, which has “special capabilities for anti-submarine warfare, surveillance and reconnaissance.”

Verdi and the IG Metall union, which is active at LH-Technik, also support the aggressive pro-war policy. Verdi executive member Christine Behle has been a member of the Lufthansa supervisory board for years and helps ensure that employees have to bear the costs of rearmament and war. On the fringes of the last Verdi congress in September, Verdi national chairman Frank Werneke said: “I am absolutely in favour of creating a special fund [for the Bundeswehr] now. This is necessary, and €100 billion will probably not be enough by far.”

This commitment on the part of the union also explains the way in which Verdi is organising the warning strikes. In a situation where protests and industrial action are constantly breaking out, Verdi wants everything but extensive industrial action. Although the Lufthansa strike was the fourth Verdi warning strike in just eight days, the union did not link the strike actions in order to maximise their impact, but carefully separated all strikes from each other. As the WSWs wrote, the struggles are being “isolated and limited to a few hours and suppressed as quickly as possible—according to the motto ‘Every man for himself!’”

This is particularly true at the airports. Only those directly employed by Lufthansa were called on to strike February 7: Lufthansa AG Ground, Lufthansa Technik, Lufthansa Systems, Lufthansa Technik Logistik Services (LTLS), Lufthansa Cargo, Lufthansa Service Gesellschaft (LSG) and LEOS (Lufthansa Engineering and Operational Services). Colleagues in the cabin and cockpit, as well as ground staff at LH subsidiaries Eurowings, Swiss, Austrian Airlines, Brussels Airlines, etc., and certainly not the new airline Discover, whose pilots had themselves gone on strike the previous weekend (February 3-4), were not called out. Only the company’s own feeder

airline Air Dolomiti cancelled a few flights on the day of the strike.

Of course, the ground staff at Fraport and the subcontractors were also left out, although they work hand in hand with Lurthansa staff on a daily basis and are suffering from the same attacks. At the subcontractor Gate Gourmet, which recently took over the services of the catering subsidiary LSG Sky, some employees have since had to accept four-figure wage cuts.

Verdi called for one rally in Berlin and one in Frankfurt. In Frankfurt, a few hundred strikers gathered at the Lufthansa headquarters, far away from flight operations. In the pouring rain, the booming loudspeakers and incessant whistling prevented any sensible dialogue between the workers.

Verdi did not organise a solidarity appeal to other airport staff, but the opposite. At the Munich and Frankfurt hubs, the non-striking rump crews preferentially handled the flights of Lufthansa’s foreign sisters Swiss, Austrian and Brussels and kept their networks operational. Lufthansa was then able to rebook the stranded customers onto these flights—a practice that can also be described as organised strikebreaking.

It is clear that this sabotage will only end when Lufthansa workers, who want to fight against social cuts and war, also take up the fight against Verdi. The only way forward for them is to build rank-and-file action committees independent of Verdi. To this end, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and its international sister parties have founded the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The action committees oppose the “every man for himself” approach of Verdi & Co. with the exact opposite principle: the unity and solidarity of the international working class. Lufthansa is a thoroughly international company with branches in all parts of the world. The workforce at the Frankfurt hub is also international, with employees maintaining personal, family and professional relationships with Greece, Turkey, Italy and all over the world. While Verdi sees this as a threat, for the workers it is a great opportunity.

The WSWs and SGP are appealing to Lufthansa employees who no longer want to watch this sellout and tragedy unfold: Get in touch with us using the form below, register via WhatsApp with the keyword “Lufthansa” via +49-163-337 8340 and set up independent action committees at the airports!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)