

Management and Verdi union conceal cuts programme at Berlin transit operator BVG

Ulrich Rippert
13 November 2024

Elections to the staff council are taking place this week at Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) transit operator. For the first time at BVG, the rank-and-file Transport Workers Action Committee is running a slate of candidates and calling for workers to break the dictatorial control exercised by the Verdi trade union and for independent rank-and-file committees to be set up in all depots and departments.

Their election appeal states: “We are running in these elections to build new fighting structures that will enable us, rank-and-file transport workers, to intervene directly in workplace disputes.”

Bus driver Andy Niklaus, who has worked for BVG since 1991, told the WSW: “Our aim is to develop the great strength and power that we have as workers. We want to strengthen the self-confidence that we are the ones who keep the city and the country moving.” He said determinedly: “We workers are not supplicants and beggars, we have rights! And these rights are more important than the profit interests of investors, speculators and the super-rich.”

Niklaus has held many discussions with his colleagues in recent weeks to emphasise why the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees is so important and urgent. It was not enough to protest against Verdi, he said, it was necessary to build new democratic structures of resistance in order to overcome Verdi’s dominance. Through independent action committees it is possible to undermine the “Verdi clique,” to build links with transport workers in other cities and other countries facing very similar problems and to prepare joint action, Niklaus stressed.

Recent political events—the election of Donald Trump as US president and the consequent break-up of the coalition government in Germany—had significantly increased the importance and urgency of “us as workers

becoming active and breaking through the bureaucratic straitjacket of the trade union apparatus,” said Niklaus.

Voting for the Action Committee’s slate and participating in the Action Committee is so important precisely because BVG management and the Berlin Senate (state government) are planning massive social attacks as part of further privatisation. Verdi sits on the BVG supervisory board and in all management bodies, but does not disclose any details about planned cost-cutting measures.

Last month, plans by the Berlin state government made up of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD) leaked out, according to which, “funding cuts for public transport” are planned on a large scale. What exactly is planned and what the effects will be remains a secret.

There is actually a transport contract between the state of Berlin and BVG that runs until 2035 and stipulates the extent to which the Senate will provide financial support for local public transport. However, this contract is subject to a review by the Senate and the transport companies every five years, and this review is imminent.

Working conditions at BVG are already becoming worse. Unbearable shifts, ever-increasing work stress and low wages mean that many employees are looking for a better job. At the same time, hundreds of jobs for drivers and technical staff remain vacant because nobody wants to put up with the low wages and lousy working conditions.

Added to this are the effects of privatisation, which is constantly being driven forward. Private service providers, such as Schröder-Reisen, which is expanding in Berlin and has also taken over some of the Flix buses, are trying to take over more and more BVG bus routes. Their aim is clear: radical social cuts and wage

reductions resulting in increased profits.

Although Schröder-Reisen is contractually obliged to comply with the safety standards and social benefits of BVG, it is not known whether and how this is being monitored. BVG staff report that workers from Poland, other Eastern European countries, and around the world are hired and deployed as drivers after a short training period and without sufficient language skills.

Verdi is doing nothing against privatisation and its effects. It did just as little when wages were cut by 16 percent for existing employees and by as much as 30 percent for new recruits. In reality, the union, which describes itself as a “co-manager,” supports the divisive wage split in order to exert pressure on workers and prevent a joint struggle.

Andy Niklaus and the Action Committee slate emphasise that the federal government’s pro-war policy, which is supported by all parliamentary parties and the trade unions, has a direct impact on the situation in workplaces and on working conditions. Their election appeal states: “In order to finance the horrendous arms build-up, all areas of public services are being cut back. Every area of social life is to be subordinated to pro-war policy.”

In the spring, when Niklaus called for support for the students at Humboldt University and their protest against the genocide in Gaza, he was immediately suspended. But Niklaus refused to be intimidated. He successfully fought back this attack on freedom of expression, emphasising that the fight against privatisation and wage theft must be directly linked to the fight against war and armament.

A few months later, the same company management that sought to muzzle opponents of war among the employees appeared as a war propagandist.

At the end of October, major Berlin daily *Tagesspiegel* published a report and a video in which a BVG employee is portrayed as a shining example because he undergoes military training at the weekend. The accompanying text reads: “Philipp J. actually works for the BVG, but at the weekend he trains as a reserve soldier. The basic training for non-servicemen was launched as a pilot project in 2019. The first round is running in Berlin this year.”

Philipp J. is quoted as saying: “I don’t really want to experience anything like 1945.” What he means by this, in view of the fact that it was Russia and the Red Army

that won the battle for Berlin in the spring of 1945 and defeated the Nazi troops, was not mentioned.

The Action Committee slate strictly rejects this military propaganda. At the end of its election appeal it states:

We have to counter the logic of war and international competition with the solidarity of workers around the world.

We are internationalists because we know that workers everywhere face the same problems and can only achieve their legitimate demands together. We defend not only our migrant colleagues, but also refugees and asylum seekers. We are already in contact with bus drivers’ action committees in London, Munich and many other cities and have joined together in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We don’t just talk about international solidarity, we organize it!



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact