

“What’s needed is a general strike”

# Warning strike at Berlin urban transit operator BVG

**Tamino Dreisam, Marianne Arens**

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On Monday, the second warning strike at Berlin’s urban transit operator BVG took place, called by the Verdi union as part of the ongoing wage dispute. The 24-hour strike brought bus, tram, and subway services in the capital to a near-standstill, with the exception of the S-Bahn, which was not included in the strike.

The conflict at BVG coincides with the largest social cutbacks in the history of postwar Germany. During the 2025 federal election campaign, all the establishment parties are competing for more rearmament and are advancing the militarization of society as a whole. Austerity budgets are being passed, and real wage cuts agreed to. In the automotive industry, as seen at Volkswagen, tens of thousands of jobs are being eliminated, and the entire public sector is also under attack.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrat, SPD) and Friedrich Merz (Christian Democrat, CDU), the two leading candidates, agree on allocating further vast sums for the upcoming war budget. Merz made it clear during their TV debate last weekend, saying, “We will have to set priorities in the budget”. “And setting priorities means that we can no longer wish for everything. That we may also have to specifically address the reduction of subsidies, that we also have to specifically look at the public sector.” Scholz did not disagree.

In this situation, building a mass movement against the policies of austerity and war is not only necessary, it is also possible. Simultaneous with the wage disputes at BVG, 2.6 million public sector workers, 192,000 railway workers, 170,000 DHL and Deutsche Post employees, as well as ground staff at Lufthansa are also engaged in labor disputes.

Public transit workers in France are also on strike. This week, RER train drivers in Paris and for the Astuce network in Rouen are engaged in industrial action.

However, Verdi and the other unions are doing everything they can to prevent a genuine mass movement from developing. This is particularly evident this week. Instead of mobilizing all workers for a joint strike and struggle, Verdi is attempting to “let off steam” with isolated and fragmented warning strikes.

For example, on Monday, BVG workers in Berlin were on strike; on Tuesday, the city railway in Hanover; and on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, the public sector in other cities. Postal workers held several warning strikes the previous week. And all these actions are organized by the same union—Verdi.

Additionally, the Railway and Transport Union (EVG) has said it will completely refrain from strikes and aim to conclude wage negotiations before the federal election on February 23. Verdi also announced that Monday’s warning strike was associated with a 40-day ultimatum, meaning no further strikes are planned until its expiration on March 21.

The calculation behind this is clear: A massive strike movement during the election campaign must be prevented, as it could jeopardize the efforts of the ruling class to bring a stable government to power through the early election in order to massively accelerate rearmament. For this reason, the unions are doing everything in their power to prevent a broad strike movement from taking place. They support the government’s policies of rearmament and war and are committed to suppressing any opposition to them.

No doubt, Verdi intends to enforce cuts in real wages at BVG and elsewhere, which are necessary for the government to finance its pro-war policies. Officially, the union is demanding an increase of €750 (\$782) in the base salary with a 12-month contract, a shift allowance of €300 (\$312) for driving personnel, the doubling of the shift premium from €100 to €200 (\$104 to \$208), and a bonus 13th month’s salary. After years of concessions, these demands, based on a membership survey, represent the absolute minimum.

The current contract was signed in 2020 and does not take into account the recent hike in inflation. BVG workers have been struggling for years with excessively low wages and miserable working conditions: turnaround times of just a few minutes are often insufficient even for a bathroom break; drivers constantly have to switch bus lines, and there is a chronic shortage of staff.

Berlin’s Transport Senator (state minister) Ute Bonde (CDU) has rejected the demands and is considering a four-year

contract. Moreover, Verdi has no real intention of actually fighting for its demands.

A statement from the Transport Workers Action Committee was distributed during the warning strike, calling on BVG employees to break with the Verdi apparatus and organize independently. Regarding Verdi's union secretary for Berlin-Brandenburg, Jeremy Arndt, the statement noted:

*Arndt himself stated that the requested wage increase would amount to 25 percent and that the additional costs for BVG would be around €250 million. This already hints at capitulation. Verdi has never negotiated a double-digit wage increase. The last time 200,000 public sector employees took strike action and won an 11 percent increase as part of a 12-month contract was under the then ÖTV union (Public Service, Transport and Traffic) in 1974.*

Older workers, of course, remember this. In the staff council election last November, Verdi lost its majority among BVG bus drivers. This waning of support was also evident at the strike rally. Despite multiple attempts, when Verdi called out from the stage, "Who is the union?" expecting a response of, "We are the union," it was instead met largely with silence.

"If Verdi doesn't secure something substantial in this round, I'm leaving the union," said Mehmet, who barely earns more than the social welfare threshold. Verdi had already disappointed workers in the past, for example, with the COVID-19 compensation, which was spread over several years. He said, "We should have received the money immediately, not two years later."

Regarding the current wage negotiations, Mehmet emphasized the importance of acting as a "strong community," and he wanted to learn more about the rank-and-file Transport Workers Action Committee. "So far, we are hardly noticed. There must be real solidarity, where we all stand together. BVG is not an isolated case—Deutsche Post, Deutsche Bahn, the public sector. ... If we all strike together, we achieve much more."

His parents, who worked their entire lives, now received a pension "that barely covers rent—that can't be right!" Mehmet said. He reported that some colleagues, after 40 years' work, can barely make it to retirement age. "And that's not an isolated case; it's happening more and more."

Many strikers complained about high rents in Berlin. One bus driver said, "The goal must be at least €1,000 (\$1,043) more gross. That would solve some problems for us." He immediately added, "But that should also apply to the cleaning staff, who clean the toilets or those working in the operating rooms at hospitals."

Other workers reported that their companies had already been partially privatized. Increasingly large areas are being outsourced to Schroeder-Reisen, where working conditions are even worse, and drivers often work well over 200 hours a month (normal would be 156 hours).

Many agreed with the Transport Workers Action Committee

demand that all negotiations be conducted publicly and livestreamed. The committee states:

In order to fully enforce the current demands, the wage dispute must not be left to the Verdi leadership. No negotiations behind closed doors! Online live broadcasts for oversight by rank-and-file workers! Full disclosure of all negotiation protocols! Formation of action committees to prepare for an all-out strike!

Many repeatedly emphasized the need to fight together with all other workers.

"It's very sad that the strike is being done this way," said a driver named Christiane. "What's needed is a general strike. We keep the whole city running. And we are not children—there's a reason we are out here! We should all strike together; otherwise, we will not be heard."

"I think we should strike for at least a week," said Velimir, a member of the Transport Workers Action Committee. "One day is pointless; it achieves nothing. We are all in this together."

He thought it was "not good at all" that politicians continued to allocate more money to rearmament rather than social programs, which are also increasingly being privatized. He reported that a colleague, only 50 years old, had just passed away, "a good colleague! He worked as a driver for more than 20 years."

Several striking drivers emphasized that they had no idea who to vote for in the federal elections. It was often heard: "This time, you really don't know who you can even vote for." But in a conversation with Andy Niklaus, a bus driver and member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, Velimir said, "I definitely support them. They are the only anti-war party, the only party I can understand, and whose program I find good."



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