

16,000 local transit workers hold protest strikes in Berlin

Verdi union enters arbitration, blocking all-out strike at Berlin transit operator BVG

Carola Kleinert
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Some 16,000 workers at public transit operator Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG) took limited strike action Wednesday to Friday this week in support of their demand for a wage increase of €750 per month.

At the same time, public service union Verdi launched a ballot for an unlimited strike, which has long been demanded by thousands of BVG workers since company management and the Transport Senator (Berlin state minister) Ute Bonde (CDU, Christian Democrat) made completely unacceptable offers in negotiations.

On March 21, which the union officials had arrogantly announced as the “day of reckoning” for an acceptable offer from the employers, Verdi declared that the contract negotiations had failed. Immediately afterwards, however, the first steps were taken to set up a conciliation process.

Behind closed doors, Jeremy Arndt, chief negotiator and deputy chairman of the BVG supervisory board, had agreed to talk about conciliation. Various media outlets reported support from within the Verdi contract bargaining commission for such a process.

On the second day of the strike, Verdi and BVG signed an arbitration agreement and appointed two conciliators: former Thuringia state Premier Bodo Ramelow (Left Party) for Verdi and Mathias Platzeck (SPD, Social Democrat), former state Premier of Brandenburg, for the employer.

The rank-and-file Transport Workers Action Committee, which participated in the strikes, spoke with strikers who had gathered in front of BVG headquarters.

Having just cast their vote for an all-out strike to support their more than justified demands against the

employers, many of the transit workers expressed their concerns about the conciliation process, which ultimately means the abandonment of any industrial action.

The agreement to formal conciliation was reached without a mandate from rank-and-file workers. While Verdi had observed certain democratic norms during the collective bargaining negotiations, which have been taking place since December 2024, consulting its members to confirm their willingness to take part in any warning strikes, transit workers only found out about the planned arbitration process through the press.

This is now being discussed intensively in BVG employee chat groups on social media.

E.F. writes: “I don’t know of anyone who was asked about the arbitration. Verdi also denied it intended to do so. Of course, I looked stupid when I found out from the media.”

D.B. was also critical: “It was said from the outset that we (Verdi members) have the say in this conflict through voting. In this matter, however, we were not consulted about arbitration.” He goes on to write that conciliation meant there would be no chance of “putting further pressure on the employer/Senate” since the union had agreed not to strike during the arbitration proceedings. “However, from the outset, Verdi had suggested to us that we should try to persuade the Senate to reach an acceptable result, if necessary, by means of an unlimited strike.”

Talking to Andy Niklaus, spokesperson for the Transport Workers Action Committee, several bus drivers from the Müllerstrasse depot who took part in the strike rally agreed “Conciliation must be prevented, because that would mean they could give us a bad

contract through the back door and cheat us again.”

Niklaus warned that the wages struggle had reached a critical point. “The question is becoming increasingly acute: giving in with a bad contract as a result of arbitration or an unlimited strike by all BVG employees.”

Niklaus emphasised that the arbitration process was intended to curb workers’ willingness to fight through the imposition of a no-strike period and to prevent any communication with a news blackout.

Many of his colleagues felt the same way. Elio said, “You’re right, arbitration has to be stopped!” adding that he feared “They’ll sell us out again, and make a lousy deal like in the past.”

Others like Hikmat stressed that “the struggle decides” whether our justified wage demand will be met. “This time, we must not put up with it. There is too much at stake.”

“Arbitration must be prevented, because it means one thing: that we have no say and no real influence on the outcome of the conciliation process,” another worker said.

Niklaus warned: “The union officials want to misuse the ballot for an indefinite strike to make a deal. Manuel von Stubenrauch, speaking for the Verdi collective bargaining commission, said it himself: ‘Every vote for an indefinite strike ... and every strong day of strike action improves ... our position at the negotiating table in arbitration.’”

“We in the Action Committee say NO! The strike ballot is not a negotiating ploy!” said Niklaus. The Action Committee called on transit workers to halt the arbitration and force Verdi to organise an unlimited strike.

“The decision to strike must also be carried through against the Verdi bureaucrats. The establishment of our Transport Workers Action Committee is an important step in this direction,” Niklaus said.

At the strike rally, Niklaus and Action Committee supporters distributed many copies of the statement “Halt arbitration! Force Verdi to organise an unlimited strike!” which met with great interest. The statement emphasises the political situation which BVG workers confront in their wage struggle:

An all-out strike would disrupt the current

coalition negotiations between the CDU and SPD to form a new government under conditions where both parties have already announced they are planning massive social attacks to finance a program of military rearmament costing billions of euros for war credits.

The aim is to prevent us from conducting a successful industrial dispute and prioritizing our legitimate demands over the profit interests of shareholders and the government’s war policy. Because there is a simultaneous wage dispute for the 2.4 million public sector workers and a stream of layoffs in the auto and supplier industry, our wage dispute has a signal effect. The government fears that it will be the prelude to broader resistance. That is why they want to force us to accept arbitration and give up most of our demands.



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