

Postal, transport and public sector Action Committees in Germany hold joint online meeting

Our reporters
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On April 10, rank-and-file Action Committees representing workers in some of the sectors currently confronting the betrayals of service union Verdi met online.

Among the participants were postal workers, bus drivers from the Berlin public transport company BVG, public sector workers, hospital staff, administrative workers and several workers from other sectors. The central question was: How can we continue to fight against Verdi selling out our struggles for better wages and conditions?

“We workers are supposed to pay for rearmament and war with our jobs, our wages and working conditions—in other words, with our health,” explained Dietmar Gaisenkersting, spokesperson for the Action Committees, in his introduction. Gaisenkersting, himself employed in the public sector, described the anger among his colleagues: “After the cuts in real wages of recent years and the never-ending staff shortages, almost all of us would have supported unlimited all-out strikes.”

That is why Verdi had used the manoeuvre of arbitration, Gaisenkersting explained further. “In all our different areas, the same pattern is followed: the contract negotiations are led to failure in order to go into arbitration. The results of arbitration then reduce real wages and make the miserable working conditions even worse.”

The Verdi contract bargaining commission regularly called for the poor results to be accepted. The reason for this is that the Verdi leadership around Frank Werneke, Christine Behle and Andrea Kocsis, as long-standing members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), agree with the policies of the federal government, in which the SPD sits:

They are all pulling in the same direction. Just like the leader of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) Yasmin Fahimi and the other union bosses, Verdi shares the view of those in power that Germany must become a great power again. They are making one trillion euros available for rearmament and the development of a “war-ready” infrastructure, while telling us that there is no money for adequate wages.

The contribution of BVG bus driver Andy Niklaus, spokesperson for the Transport Workers Action Committee, made it clear how brazenly Verdi is enforcing a bad deal at BVG, even though 95.4 percent of employees had spoken out in favour of an unlimited all-out strike.

“The result of arbitration, which is currently being sold to us as the best possible outcome, has adopted (with only minimal deviations) the employer’s offer of 12 March,” said Niklaus. The one-off payment of €1,500 was intended to help ensure that many members voted in favour. In reality, it would postpone a consolidated wage increase for five months.

“The one-time payment cannot hide the fact that Verdi and the employers are once again selling us out, as they did in the past wage struggles.”

Niklaus called on members to vote “No” in the membership ballot, which concludes 25 April, to push through the demand for an all-out strike and to build the Transport Workers Action Committee in order to counter the systematic sell-out by the union leaderships with an alternative.

There were also detailed reports about the sell-out at Deutsche Post DHL. DHL delivery operative Martin reported that, despite 54 percent of postal workers voting against, the Verdi leadership had accepted an offer that effectively included cuts in real wages and 8,000 job cuts. “The fact is,” Martin emphasised, “we at Deutsch Post DHL urgently need more people!”

He described the conditions under which individual workers not only have to unload entire lorries onto the conveyor but also have to service ever larger delivery districts. This was also confirmed by another participant: Deutsche Post had introduced new “flex” systems in the delivery areas, which meant delivery staff could be “flexibly deployed.” This was leading to ever larger parcel volumes and more extensive service districts. “This is happening all the time now.” And it made it clear how much staff were actually lacking everywhere.

Max, from the Nuremberg Hospital, provided a concrete description of the effects on the health sector: “Verdi has deliberately avoided an indefinite strike. This has led to us losing more colleagues who have resigned.” This showed how urgent it was to build independent rank-and-file committees as an alternative to Verdi.

This comment sparked a lively discussion. A postal worker and another bus driver both emphasised their dissatisfaction and assured the group that they would use their membership of Verdi to vote against the arbitration result. However, the question arose as to what alternative would present itself if they were to leave Verdi. “I don’t want to lose my right to vote,” said one. “How can you legitimately conduct a labour dispute outside the unions?” One participant recalled that in the system of so-called “contract autonomy” only the strongest union, which had the most members in the company, was recognised as a partner of the employers and the government.

Ulrich Rippert, honorary chairman of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), responded to this. He reminded the audience that “what is currently taking place is a fundamental upheaval of the entire political situation. We are experiencing a vehement military build-up the likes of which we have not seen since the Nazi era. We are confronted with a government that has declared war on us workers and wants to enforce massive social cuts.” He continued:

I think it is very important to vote “No.” But Verdi has made it clear that it will nevertheless push through the bad agreement. The workers at Deutsche Post can tell you a thing or two about that. It is therefore crucial that we organise ourselves independently to break the dictatorship of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Everyone is talking about a “new era,” Rippert continued, “which is supposed to express that things are fundamentally changing.”

Instead of international trade agreements, we are experiencing a tariff war, a trade war and preparations for military war. A fundamental change is also taking place in the trade union movement. The unions—not only Verdi, but also IG Metall and the entire DGB—are acting as the government’s fifth column, no longer as representatives of the interests of the workers. They are prepared to enforce cuts in real wages and massive social cuts against the workers.

“We have to react to this change by changing the way the working class is organised,” Rippert continued. There were historical examples of this. The working class had also formed action committees and its own organisations in the past to fight revolutionary struggles, including against the trade unions, because “the trade unions only represent part of the working class. The vast majority are not organised.”

Rippert recalled the occupation of the engineering company VDM in Frankfurt (a subsidiary of Metallgesellschaft) in October 1981, in which he himself, as a machine fitter, had played a major role. He reported:

It was decided to shut down the entire plant. Naturally, this caused a great deal of unrest in the plant, also because it was known that people were being laid off in other engineering companies (such as the Adlerwerke). IG Metall immediately responded by developing a “social plan,” which meant nothing more than agreeing to the closure.

In this situation, we built an action committee in the plant and took matters into our own hands. We occupied the plant for more than a week. And although we did not succeed in sparking a wave of occupations at the time, we eventually won ten times the planned severance pay for the mostly older employees, as well as a guarantee that no one would be disciplined.

Workers can achieve anything because they have the power, not the unions.

Rippert stressed, “The prevailing conditions are not God-given. Questions of law and legal questions are ultimately questions of power. We, as workers, have much more power than the bureaucracy. Everything depends on how we decide and how the working class reacts. That is why the reorganisation in the form of action committees is so important.”

Carola also spoke on this question. She said: “We are used to—and have been taught time and again—that we have to abide by the legal regulations and the collective bargaining agreements that the state prescribes.” That is the framework within which we are allowed to operate. “But this framework has been attacked, not by us, but by the employers and the political side.”

She reminded the audience that “it was the workers who originally won the right to strike. And today, the unions are helping to undermine the

right to strike.” Carola said:

The framework in which we are used to thinking is being extremely constricted. That is why it is essential, if we really want to stand up for our interests and fight for them, that we break through this framework that is being forced upon us. That is why we have formed these independent action committees.

The action committees are based on completely different principles than the trade unions, which Rippert explained as follows:

Our first principle is that the needs of us workers and our families, our vital interests, are more important than the profit interests and political interests of the capitalists, the shareholders, speculators and their lackeys in government. And the second principle is that this is only possible if we work together internationally; if we counter the employers, who pursue a global strategy in their corporations, with our own international strategy, and if we join forces to abolish all capitalist exploitation in a common struggle.

The international dimension of the action committees that are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was further highlighted by two messages of support from the UK and Canada. In the message from Britain, David Andrews reported how the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (UK) had been formed in response to the sell-out of a national strike movement by the CWU postal union in 2022. Regarding the sell-out by Verdi, Andrews wrote:

We here at Royal Mail are all too familiar with such corrupt and pro-corporate tactics used against us by the Communication Workers Union (CWU). The union bureaucracy only comes out to sabotage a genuine fight. They have conspired with the leaders of the companies and the government to sell out our demands through arbitration. In this way, they are enforcing even more competition and greater profitability.

“This is no ordinary fight,” warned Andrews, and continued urgently, “We must unify our struggles, regardless of which national company we work for, because we are all on the front line against a global attack in which the corporate oligarchy acts in the same way in every country.”

In the message from Canada, Daniel Berkley, a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Canada) from Ontario, also pointed out the following:

Automation and artificial intelligence could make our work much easier, but the Canada Post Corporation insists that instead of benefiting workers, these new technologies are designed to enable them to compete with Amazon and other gig economy companies by increasing corporate profits and reducing labour costs. And the Liberal government and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) are supporting them in this.

Both messages made it clear how much the problems faced by workers

today are similar, and that the unions in each country play the same role.

In conclusion, Gaisenkersting underscored that, “We are the ones who keep the whole show on the road, and society should be organised around our needs, not corporate profits.” He called on all participants from Deutsche Post, public transport and public service to actively participate in building the necessary action committees.



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