# German dockworkers reject contract for a fourth time

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Workers at German seaports have rejected the fourth wage offer presented to them by the Verdi trade union working in conjunction with the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS). In a survey—the so-called "feedback round"—64.7 percent of those responding voted against the offer on September 14, i.e., 3,578 of the more than 5,500 dockworkers polled.

The latest offer included a 3.4 percent increase in hourly wages retroactive to August 1 for a 12-month term, supplemented by an additional €200 in vacation pay and an increased annual lump sum of €416 for container handling starting in January 2027. The workers original demand, however was for an 8.2 percent increase and at least €2.50 more per hour.

The contract bargaining has been ongoing for six weeks, after the previous agreement expired at the end of July. The workers have already demonstrated their willingness to fight, undertaking two major warning strikes. The fact that nearly two-thirds of those surveyed have rejected the "compromise" for a fourth time is a slap in the face not only for the managers of the port operations but for the Verdi leadership, which now finds itself forced to initiate a strike ballot on an indefinite strike.

The strike authorization vote began on Friday and will last until October 1; the votes will be counted on October 2, 2026. However, the union wants to avoid an indefinite enforcement strike at all costs. On the Verdi website, it has already warned that such a strike would require "a quorum of over 75 percent of the approximately 8,700 members eligible to vote."

The workers are ready to fight. This was already evident two weeks ago, when up to 11,000 workers in Hamburg, Bremen/Bremerhaven, Emden, Brake and Wilhelmshaven took part in the second 48-hour warning strike.

However, in order to achieve their more than justified wage demand, it is urgently necessary for dockworkers to organize themselves into independent action committees. They must join forces with their colleagues along the entire North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts and wage the struggle together—not only for living wages, but to defend every job and ensure decent working conditions, as well as to oppose arms shipments and the conversion of civilian infrastructure into military production.

Verdi, together with the employers' associations, is doing everything in its power to prevent an indefinite strike. Even during the survey it carried out, workers were subjected to a barrage of counterarguments.

Verdi negotiator Sylvi Krisch painted a rosy picture of the latest offer, saying it had "only been achieved after a tough struggle." According to Krisch, with this offer, "the employers have accommodated the employees' desire for a shorter contract term." She claimed it was the final and best offer because "The employers have repeatedly stated that the budget has been exhausted."

Her counterpart at the negotiating table representing the seaport companies, Torben Seebold, attempted to pressure the workers with threats. He stated, "The effects of a prolonged strike would extend far beyond the port operations." Ultimately, only the ports in Rotterdam, Antwerp-Bruges, and elsewhere would benefit from the strike. "Cargo that is diverted abroad" would subsequently be excluded from German port operations, according to Seebold.

He and the Verdi leaders have known each other for years. Seebold is currently a board member of the employers' association Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA), with an annual salary of nearly three-quarters of a million euros (according to the Hamburg tax authority). In this capacity, he sits at the negotiating table as the employers' chief negotiator in the collective bargaining talks. Seebold began his career as a Verdi official, however, first in Cologne and later for many years on the coast, where he was responsible for shipping and ports. He was also a leading member of the European

Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). Just eight years ago, Seebold led collective bargaining negotiations on the other side of the table, on behalf of employees in the maritime sector.

Seebold is a prime example of how easily union officials switch sides and make the career leap to the even more lucrative executive board. But Verdi officials themselves also earn many times more annually than what they expect workers in the ports, terminal and logistics operations to accept for gruelling maritime cargo work.

The fact that the Verdi leadership stands firmly on the side of German industry and the shipping conglomerates, which it allegedly opposes, was already evident during the last 2022 contract round. Even then, the mood was militant, and all rounds of negotiations broke down. Verdi responded by accepting a court-ordered settlement to avoid having to call a forced strike.

The court ordered that strikes be suspended for another six weeks, and finally, after the tenth round of negotiations, Verdi pushed through the new contract. The agreed-upon increase of just under 8 percent over two years quickly turned out to be yet another real-term wage cut, as gasoline and food prices, in particular, were constantly rising. At the time, Verdi refused to hold a membership vote, arguing that the Federal Collective Bargaining Commission had "already approved 90 percent" of the outcome.

The same pattern repeats itself in all contract rounds where the Verdi union represents workers: at the postal service, Lufthansa, the public sector, in hospitals and daycare centers, and at the Berlin Transport Authority. Everywhere, Verdi uses limited warning strikes as a safety valve to subsequently push through a sellout. Now the dockworkers dispute is also threatened with the same pitiful end.

If Verdi were serious about enforcing its demands, it could have rallied the entire Baltic Sea coast. The maritime corporations in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania are also organized within the same employers' association, the ZDS. But the workforces at these companies were deliberately not called upon to join the strike, mainly in light of the current state elections in that state. At no cost did the Verdi bureaucrats want to risk a strike developing in parallel with the elections, one that could spiral out of control and slip beyond the unions' control.

The Verdi officials themselves are members of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party; i.e., they support the government's war policies, which are increasingly militarizing all of production and society while simultaneously showering the oligarchs with billions in gifts. The working class bears the brunt of this in the form of low wage settlements and growing pressure at work, while their children face the threat of conscription and military service.

Especially in these global hubs the wage struggle is closely linked to the political issues of war and social cutbacks. The ports are bottlenecks of the global economy and, at the same time, transshipment points for arms shipments, for example to Israel, which uses the weapons against the Palestinians in Gaza.

The potential for a joint, international struggle is currently growing rapidly. Alongside German port workers, port workers in the Netherlands are also on strike. In Italy, port workers in Genoa, Salerno, and Livorno repeatedly refuse to load military cargo bound for Israel and explicitly link their wage struggle to the fight against war.

The wave of strikes is currently sweeping across the entire transportation and logistics sector in Europe. Italian railway workers are also on strike, as are air traffic controllers in Belgium, flight attendants at EasyJet in France and Portugal, aircraft mechanics at Icelandair, and workers at the state-owned Romanian Oil Terminal in Constan?a on the Black Sea.

The international joint strikes by dockworkers could develop unprecedented strength and inspire the class struggle in other sectors. This would make it possible to paralyze the logistics and war machine that threatens all of society with destruction.

This, however, requires a socialist and international program, such as that advocated by the Socialist Equality Party. It calls for the formation of action committees that unite internationally, independent of the trade union bureaucracies. To this end, the International Workers' Alliance of Action Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded.

That is why we call on all dockworkers who refuse to accept Verdi's sellout and want to fight against the corporations and the government's war policies to register for the action committees, below this article, and to contact us.