

Growing opposition to Verdi trade union at Berlin airports

By Verena Nees
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Opposition to the Verdi trade union is growing among workers at Berlin's airports. Many workers are outraged at the services trade union for imposing a collective agreement for ground staff, even though the majority of members voted against it.

When the Verdi leadership declared they would sign the agreement although almost 57 percent of the membership voted against it, many spoke of their intention to leave the union.

In a statement on the *verdi-airport.de* website, the trade union reported on April 6, "co-workers are seething." Many employees had been prepared "to go even further" and to accept "the continuation of industrial action."

In the face of the members' mounting criticism, Verdi called for unity and warned of supposedly false reports from trade union opponents. It was stated on Verdi's website, "Unfortunately, trade union opponents are currently trying to divide, damage and weaken us with false reports and rumours they are spreading online. Do not fall for these 'alternative facts', but speak to us. You will receive comprehensive and reliable information and details from us."

The commenting function for this article on *verdi-airport.de* was deactivated as a precaution.

Verdi avoided any specifics. There was neither any reference to a false report, nor any attempt to correct one. No opponent of the trade union was named. But it is a fact that only the WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) condemned the pathetic contract negotiated and called on ground staff to vote down the contract. Both the employer association and Verdi called for workers to vote in favour.

Verdi portrays the agreement as an improvement for the workforce and claims that no more was possible. This is not true. The contract will have two main results, which are both in the interests of the corporations. It consolidates low wages in a sector where tough and very demanding work is carried out in shifts. And with its long duration, it ensures three years of labour peace—i.e., it denies the workers the use of their most important weapon for three years by banning strikes.

The claim that no more was possible is also false. The contract emerged because Verdi broke off the strike when the considerable extent of its impact and the substantial power at the disposal of ground staff became clear.

An examination of the course of the confrontation makes clear that Verdi directed the entire process against the workforce. From the outset, Verdi sought to limit the strike to single days. The

union concluded collective agreements at all other airports so as to isolate the workers in Berlin.

On the third day, Verdi agreed to secret exploratory talks with a mediator. It nominated for this purpose the interior senator in the former SPD/Left Party coalition government, Ehrhart Körting (SPD), under whose direction ground staff operations in the state of Berlin were privatised. The negotiating commission then accepted a three-year contract, and after the majority voted it down, Verdi imposed it against the will of the membership.

The role of the trade unions

The experience through which ground staff are currently passing is similar to workers in all industries and services internationally: a serious struggle against low wages and miserable working conditions cannot be waged with, but only against, the trade unions. The trade unions play workers at one location off against another, divide workers and subordinate them to the profit interests of the corporations and businesses. The unity of the workers cannot be established through the trade unions, but only in opposition to them.

The WSWS and SGP make no secret of the fact that they are adversaries of the trade unions, since the unions have become adversaries of the working class, which they confront with ever more aggressive and open hostility.

In every struggle, whether at airports, public transport, hospitals or industrial sectors, such as currently at Bombardier, workers face the problem that their union representatives cooperate in the drafting of management's plans and enforce them.

They sit on company supervisory boards and negotiate plans for rationalisation and restructuring in secret talks. In collective bargaining talks, they play a double game. For a few crumbs in wage increases, they sacrifice all that has been secured in past struggles, transform jobs into precarious and low-paid positions, and stab in the back all resistance from workers.

Trade-union-organised strikes and rallies serve merely to let off steam, demoralise the workers and demonstrate to company management the importance of the unions for enforcing their plans.

This is something employees at the airports have experienced time and again. Last autumn, when pilots, cabin crew and ground staff from Air Berlin and Tuifly organised a sick-out protest against the restructuring of the companies and job cuts, the leadership of Verdi issued a joint call with the pilots' union

Cockpit and Air Berlin calling on other employees to work emergency shifts and thus act as strikebreakers.

Low wages have not fallen from the sky, but were agreed upon in conjunction with the unions. The WSWS has exposed the despicable role played by Verdi in the privatisation of ground staff services. When the SPD-Left Party coalition state government prepared the majority-state-owned Globeground for privatisation in 2003 by founding a subsidiary company called Ground Service International, the works council and Verdi agreed to this, according to the *Freitag* newspaper.

Prior to the sale to the private company WISAG in 2008, Verdi ensured the adoption of a cost-cutting contract in which the membership gave up around one fifth of their income. This fired the “starting gun for the wage dumping strategy,” according to Jörn Boewe in *Freitag*.

The workers have been divided up among various firms and subcontractors in the period since, while their wages and working conditions have been severely undermined. Wage rates for new hires have been slashed by around 30 percent, as even trade union secretary Enrico Rümker admitted.

The dead end of nationalism

Verdi is outraged at the WSWS and SGP because we openly stand as opponents of the trade unions and explain the reason for their transformation.

The role the unions once played of securing improvements in wages and working conditions within a national framework has been transformed into its opposite. Today, the unions not only participate in the destruction of jobs and social achievements, but take the initiative in proposing them, as the works council at Volkswagen recently did.

This is connected with fundamental changes in the global economy. The global development and integration of production stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the capitalist system of nation-states, which as at the beginning of the twentieth century is sinking into trade war and military conflict.

The capitalist private ownership of the means of production, which subordinates the world economy to the profit maximisation interests of a few major finance and industrial concerns, has led to extreme levels of social inequality. The world’s eight richest people own as much wealth as the poorest half of the globe’s population, which includes some 3.5 billion people.

The pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective of the unions has transformed them into close allies of their own ruling classes in a struggle for a share of the world market. Their leading officials are paid handsomely, and union wealth is increasingly based on property and insurance investments, and supervisory board fees.

A works council conference at the German Air Transport association in March 2016 demonstrated this nationalist position clearly. The joint statement from union, government and business representatives called on the German government to “strengthen Germany as a location for air transport and retain its competitiveness.” It could not be tolerated that “politicians propose or adopt laws which result in our corporations losing market share, production facilities and jobs to their international competitors.”

When the European Union (EU) impoverished the Greek workers with one austerity package after another, the trade unions in the German Confederation of Labour (DGB) aligned themselves with Chancellor Merkel, Finance Minister Schäuble and new SPD leader Martin Schulz, who at that time was imposing the EU dictates in Brussels.

In the US, the United Auto Workers (UAW) trade union recently demonstrated the role of the unions in an especially disgusting manner. On March 15, UAW leader Dennis Williams appeared alongside US President Donald Trump and the CEOs of the three largest US automakers, and endorsed Trump’s speech, which said that American workers and corporations stood side by side and that “in our veins flows the same red patriotic blood.”

The German trade unions are no less prepared to support trade war and war, and to cooperate with far-right politicians. While in the 1950s they still mobilised in opposition to the rearmament of the German army, there has not been a single protest on their part against the rearming of recent years and the German army’s foreign military interventions. On the contrary, in early 2013, the then DGB head Michael Sommer agreed with Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democrats) to close cooperation and a partnership with the army.

In so doing, the trade unions are drawing on their reactionary traditions. During the First World War, they agreed to a so-called class truce, suppressed all opposition to the war and ensured the necessary resources, and men were sent to the front in the name of “war socialism.” After Hitler’s assumption of power, they called for a joint demonstration with the Nazis on May 1, 1933. A disturbing indication of how alive and well this tradition is was shown several weeks ago, when the IG Metall union allowed Alternative for Germany members to join their march in Görlitz.

The WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei urges the rejection of the trade unions’ nationalist and pro-capitalist policies. It is urgently necessary for workers to organise independently of the unions, make contact with workers internationally and combine the struggle for decent wages and working conditions with the fight against war and the capitalist system. This requires a socialist perspective and an international strategy.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>