

Protest strikes in German public sector and local transport

By Marianne Arens and Andy Niklaus
1 October 2020

Protest strikes are currently taking place in day-care centres and hospitals, town halls, government offices, savings banks, garbage disposal companies and elsewhere as part of the collective bargaining round for 2.3 million public sector workers. On Tuesday, public transport workers also struck several federal states at the same time.

The strikers are all “essential” workers who were praised and applauded as “coronavirus heroes” in the spring. They rightly expect not only better health and safety at work in face of the pandemic, but also better salaries and working conditions. “I cannot pay my rent from applause alone,” as one nurse remarked. The vast majority of the population agrees. A recent Forsa flash survey shows that almost two-thirds of those interviewed (63 percent) sympathise with the protest strikes.

On the other hand, the public sector employers are brutally abusing the strikers. Niklas Benrath, the new chief executive of the Federation of Municipal Employers’ Associations (VKA), essentially placed protesting workers in the same category as terrorists. He described Friday’s strikes as an “attack on the general public” and said it was “irresponsible, especially at this time of crisis ... to cover the whole country with a wave of strikes.”

The conflict, however, is marked by a profound contradiction. The token strikes are being led by the same trade unions that support the back-to-work policies of the government and have played a key role in imposing social cutbacks for years. The trade union officials, who also sit on all the major company supervisory bodies, have long been holding backroom talks with politicians to agree on supposedly necessary sacrifices.

Trade union and Social Democratic Party (SPD) members sit on both sides of the negotiating table. Ulrich Mädge, mayor of Lüneburg, who, in his capacity as VKA president, rejects the demand for a 4.8 percent wage increase as “completely excessive,” has been a member of the service union Verdi for many years. Like Verdi Chairman Frank Werneke, he is a member of the same SPD, which under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, implemented the most

comprehensive social cuts in post-war German history with the “Agenda 2010” attacks on welfare and labour rights.

After billions of euros were handed over to the banks and corporations through coronavirus aid packages, the public coffers are empty. What the municipal, state and private employers are planning with the help of Verdi is to plug the holes in their budgets at workers’ expense, as was made clear last week in a Facebook post under the hashtag #TVN2020.

According to the post, local transport companies in Mittelbaden-Nordschwarzwald presented a two-page “horror list” of demands which would result in a dramatic deterioration of working conditions. Among other things, they are demanding an increase in weekly working time to 40 hours, the abolition of Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve as days off, a reduction in Christmas bonuses to 70 percent, the abolition of holiday pay and the future permissibility of compulsory redundancies.

The employers’ brazen actions are no coincidence. They feel encouraged by Verdi’s latest oath of loyalty. In the last few days, the service sector union completely sold out the wage dispute at Deutsche Post; the EVG union did the same on the railways. In both cases, they have imposed wage sacrifices and long-duration contracts on workers to prevent strikes in the coming years.

In the public transport sector (ÖPNV), Verdi has reacted to the growing discontent that has recently been expressed in major strike movements in Berlin, Saarland, Hesse and elsewhere. Under the slogan TVN2020 (collective agreement for local public transport 2020), it has taken the simultaneous expiry of the separate collective agreements at the end of June 2020 as an opportunity to call for a nationally uniform collective agreement. This is to apply to 87,000 drivers in 130 transport companies nationwide. According to Verdi, this should put an end to “unequal treatment in the federal states.”

The union links the demand for a national collective agreement with other demands: 30 days holidays, harmonisation of working hours to 36.5 hours with full wage

compensation, a membership bonus of €500 for Verdi members. According to the union, such incentives should make both the profession of driver more attractive again in the interest of a climate-friendly “transport transformation” and Verdi membership.

Verdi is supported by various pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative (SAV), affiliated to the Socialist Party in the UK. They cheered joint appearances by Verdi functionaries with Fridays for Future activists last week as a step towards a “well-financed, developed public transport system with good wages and working conditions.”

The union, however, does not have the slightest intention of fighting for decent wages and working conditions. It is responsible for the miserable conditions which currently prevail in public transport. The situation is the direct result of an orgy of deregulation and privatisation since the 1990s, which was actively supported by Verdi and its predecessor organisations.

They have pitted federal and local authority employees against those of the Länder (federal states) public sector workers against those in private companies and signed hundreds of company collective agreements. Workforces were divided, existing wages were cut and entry-level wages were massively reduced. Since then, more than 15,000 jobs have been lost in local public transport, and hundreds of bus and train companies have been privatised.

Verdi will not consider engaging in any united industrial action worthy of the name. Although the public transport negotiations coincide with those of the rest of the public service, and the protest strikes even coincide with those in the day-care centres and clinics, Verdi conducts the negotiations for both separately.

Last week, the public sector employers flatly rejected the demand for a nationwide uniform collective agreement for public transport. Verdi will accept this and is looking for a formula to gloss over a planned sellout. The third round of negotiations will take place on October 22. Meanwhile, negotiations on urban transport continue at the state level.

The union is miles away from conducting joint nationwide industrial action. Rather, its manoeuvres are aimed precisely at preventing real industrial action and a social rebellion. As the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) has long emphasised, workers can only protect and effectively defend their interests if they take up a fight against the unions. They must form independent action committees and link up with fellow workers throughout Europe to prepare for a European-wide general strike.

Just how little Verdi regards workers’ lives and health can be seen by its handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Although the COVID-19 case numbers have been rising rapidly for weeks, it has not tabled any demands for better

protection against the virus. Like nursing staff in hospitals and old people’s homes, educators in day-care centres and teachers and social workers in schools, the drivers in crowded buses and trams are being exposed to the virus daily.

Verdi agrees with the government that there should be no further shutdown to halt the spread of the coronavirus. It has embraced the deadly “contagion” and “herd immunity” strategies. On numerous Verdi and German Union Confederation (DGB) websites, under the heading “Coronavirus—What employees need to know,” members are told, “Injuring oneself or contracting an illness are part of general life risks, whether at work or during leisure time. This also applies to employees with a previous illness that does not make them incapable of working, but with which they are exposed to a higher risk of developing a more serious course of illness due to a coronavirus infection.”

One worker told the WSWs that in Munich, union representatives unofficially spread the word that those striking should stay home during the strike—to give the public a coronavirus-correct image. An internal memo instructed them to stay home during the protest strike “because they will be looking at us. The press will be there and the WG [employers] will also see if we comply with the coronavirus rules.”

This instruction was all the more cynical as the union had not yet shown any interest in the coronavirus rules. “Not because of coronavirus—only because of the press and the employers should we stay at home. They don’t care about our lives,” was the worker’s comment.

In another comment, a bus driver wrote how Verdi personnel representatives in Berlin urban transport (BVG) deal with coronavirus: “They are not bothered about representing our interests, only their own. ... This [protest strike] is just a show to attract members. And our personnel representatives have long since given up. They only fight for themselves, so that they don’t have to go out on the road.”

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