

Germany: Frankfurt Airport personnel begin hunger strike against dismissals

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On Wednesday morning Frankfurt Airport personnel commenced a hunger strike to protest against and reverse their dismissals. The workers have resorted to this extreme measure to fight against their sackings following months of wage losses. Shortly before Christmas, the service company WISAG sacked 230 of its approximately 800 airport employees. Thirty-one apron bus drivers have not been paid since October.

The WISAG group is shamelessly exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to increase its profits and crush workers' rights. For a year, since the beginning of the pandemic, the workforce has had to accept up to 40 percent wage losses following the implementation of short-time work. Last summer, 350 WISAG workers were laid off at the Berlin-Tegel Airport. At the Frankfurt-Main Airport, 230 ground workers received their notices of termination from WISAG on December 17, shortly before Christmas.

Cemaleddin Benli is one of the affected WISAG workers who decided to go on hunger strike. His important message to all workers: "Today us, tomorrow you! We all have to fight together and stick together. WISAG has destroyed our lives—tomorrow it can be you."

Benli has worked at the airport for 36 years. "My dream was always to become a pilot. At the airport I worked with major airlines, Pan American, Delta and others. I helped build the Acciona company, which was like my own company. We handled over 200 aircraft a day." When WISAG took over concessionary work on the apron, or tarmac, from Acciona Airport Services in 2018, the writing was on the wall for many workers.

WISAG Holding, which employs around 50,000 people across the country, is owned by one of Germany's 300 richest families; its assets estimated at just under half a billion euros. Family patriarch and company founder Claus Wisser and his son Michael Wisser have close links to the Frankfurt Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the

Greens. The transport minister in the Frankfurt administration is a member of the Green Party. According to Benli, "Behind the takeover of WISAG at the airport is a political coterie involving Transport Minister Tarek Al-Wazir."

The German service trade union Verdi, the majority of whose leading personnel are either members or supporters of the SPD, the Left Party and the Greens, also supported the handover of concessions to WISAG in 2018. Verdi personnel sit on the supervisory boards of all German airport companies, e.g., Lufthansa, Fraport and WISAG. At Lufthansa, Verdi, together with the pilot unions Ufo and Cockpit, has offered the management wage cuts of up to 50 percent. Verdi is also on the other side of the barricades in the workers' industrial action against WISAG.

As Benli reports, airport ramp workers have made bad experiences with the service workers union. "Worst of all is Verdi," says Benli. "You can forget about them. They haven't lifted a finger for us." They have not even informed their membership about the struggle at WISAG, he said. "They are only interested in whether membership dues are paid or not."

He related how 230 workers were served with their redundancies by WISAG. "Two workers had to hand out the redundancies just before Christmas. That was tough and clearly showed that the 'appreciation' Claus Wisser officially proclaimed was just window dressing. Inside the corporation there is no such 'appreciation' for the workforce."

He reported, "WISAG tells us there is no work because of the pandemic, but that's a lie. Forty to 50 machines are being handled every day." The colleagues currently working on the apron are being massively exploited.

In addition, Benli said, air traffic safety is acutely threatened. "We have all undergone thorough training and have to undergo further training every two years. WISAG

has hired new temporary workers, who are not trained for the job. What if something happens? You are risking a crash.”

Apron workers have no proper protection against COVID-19. “There have been many cases so far. Normally, colleagues should be informed and protected. But here everything is covered up—like the Mafia.”

About 10 years ago, Benli suffered a serious work accident. He fell from a plane onto the concrete runway from a height of four and a half metres and had to be flown to hospital by helicopter. “My whole life passed me by like in a film,” he said. “Since then, I’ve been in pain most of the time, have to take pills and have severe sleep disorders. The dismissal has made everything worse.” The father of five, with two sons still in school, does not know what to do next. “At the age of 53, no one will hire me anymore. I pay a rent of nearly 1,000 euros per month and have credit obligations.”

The dismissed workers are to be fobbed off with a shabby severance package. After 22 years of service, the company offered Benli severance pay of just €4,000—a sum totally inadequate to take care of him and his family. With a stroke of a pen, workers are expected to give up all their rights, although most of them have worked at the airport for a much longer period than WISAG, which only started operations two years ago.

In fact, it is precisely these workers who have been doing hard labour at the airport for 20 years or more and have earned somewhat better conditions, e.g., the right to a company pension, that the company now wants to eliminate.

“WISAG has destroyed 230 families, and the government looks on,” Benli says. “Aren’t children the future? They don’t give a s... about our children.” He sees the hunger strike as a “beginning” to wake up the public and especially all workers. “We have been fighting for months, but neither WISAG nor the politicians have budged.”

In August, the company adopted a new “corporate course and strategy,” according to which it intends to reduce its staff at the airport “permanently to about 60 percent of pre-pandemic capacity.” To compensate, the company is relying on temporary workers to divide the workforce and enforce the principle of hire and fire, virtually without restriction. Already in March 2020, temporary workers were the first to be dismissed.

Some bus drivers who have gone without pay for months are also taking part in the hunger strike. On October 1, WISAG told its 31 bus drivers they would be

outsourced to Sky City Bus GmbH immediately. The company has only existed since March and does not respect workers’ existing rights. Because the drivers refused to be outsourced, as is their right, they have not been paid for four months.

The workers have turned to the IGL, a federation of individual air transport unions, which has organised several demonstrations and rallies since December. “The IGL has helped us,” says Benli. However, the IGL’s political perspective is no different from that of the German federation of Trade Unions (DGB), i.e., a nationalist, pro-capitalist programme.

In the notification announcing the hunger strike, the IGL wrote: “Together with our members, we have tried **everything**” (emphasis in original), i.e., appeals to Claus Wisser and the WISAG executive, to Federal Economics Minister Peter Altmaier (CDU) and the Hessian state parliament, all of which have, not surprisingly, remained largely unanswered and fruitless.

WISAG workers cannot pin their hopes on the ministers and capitalists, who are behind the attacks on jobs and wages. They must turn to their natural allies—the hundreds of thousands of workers in other companies at the airports who also confront mass sackings and attacks on working conditions during the coronavirus pandemic. Workers have been forced to accept ever worsening conditions while risking their lives and health.

Airport workers—whether at WISAG, Lufthansa, Fraport, in the cargo sector or elsewhere—must take up the fight together to defend every job and all existing conditions! As long as the pandemic rages, work must be reduced to the essential, with full wage compensation for all those affected. The Socialist Equality Party proposes the building of independent, internationally networked action committees to prepare a European-wide general strike.



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