

Stop the intimidation of opponents of war! Defend bus driver Andy Niklaus against the Berlin Transport Company!

Ulrich Rippert
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Andy Niklaus is a bus driver in Berlin and has been employed by the Berlin Transport Company (BVG) for 33 years. He is an opponent of war and a socialist—a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP). The BVG suspended him from work because he spoke out against the genocide in Gaza in a video and called for the struggle against deteriorating working conditions to be linked to the struggle against war.

In the spring of this year a series of demonstrations took place against the Israeli bombing of Gaza. After students at Berlin's Humboldt University protesting against the genocide were brutally attacked and arrested by Berlin police, Niklaus released a video calling for support for the students. He called upon his colleagues at the BVG and all workers to support students in their struggle against military terror and genocide. He pointed out that the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza cannot be separated from the rapid military build-up by the German government and its active support of the NATO war against Russia.

Niklaus raised the connection between war and social attacks and the fact that the costs of rearmament and arms deliveries are to be paid by the working class. That is why the struggle against war and genocide requires a struggle against capitalism and exploitation. He stated: "To fight against this, we have to organise ourselves in independent action committees, directed against the devastating and paralysing union policy."

Only by fighting against the nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the public service union Verdi and all other trade unions would it be possible to build a worldwide movement against war and exploitation. Capitalism cannot be reformed but must be replaced by a socialist society "organised not according to profits and war, but according to human need," Niklaus stressed.

The video met with an enthusiastic response and was seen and liked thousands of times within a few hours. Many workers commented on the video, thanking Niklaus for his "powerful" and "courageous" statements and expressed their solidarity.

Two days later, on May 27, the BVG delivered a letter informing Niklaus he was suspended from his position at BVG with immediate effect. In the letter, the BVG stated:

You are obliged to conduct yourself both on and off duty in such a way that the company's reputation is not jeopardised, and you must conduct yourself in a manner in keeping with the company's reputation and standards. You must refrain from making public political statements.

Niklaus was asked to respond "in detail and in writing" to the content of the video within the next two days. The BVG stated threateningly: "As a precautionary measure, we would like to point out that a decision will be made as to whether or which labour law measures will be taken depending on the content of the statement."

The request that Niklaus "must refrain from making public political statements" is outrageous. The BVG presumes to prohibit its employees from exercising their fundamental right to political freedom of expression and muzzle them.

For his part, Andy Niklaus has refused to be intimidated. He commissioned a reputable law firm to represent his interests and obtained an extension of the deadline. He then explained in the lawyer's letter that all his statements were protected by the fundamental right to freedom of expression. He cited a supreme court decision according to which the Basic Law and basic democratic rights apply in workplaces for all employees.

The BVG's legal department then withdrew the suspension but issued a warning. It no longer justified its measure with substantive criticism or a general ban on "public political statements," but only criticised the fact that the statements had been made in work clothing and in front of BVG buses. BVG did not comply with a legal request to remove the warning from his personnel file.

The fact that Andy Niklaus fought back this attempt at intimidation is very important. The BVG management is extremely worried. It fears that staff opposition to the constant deterioration of working conditions, which is being impelled by the gradual privatisation of bus routes, will link up with the growing opposition to war and military rearmament and initiate an insurrectionary movement against public transport company

and the German government.

The management is aware of the considerable power of BVG employees and all other transport workers. They know very well that a joint strike by public transport workers could paralyse the capital in a very short period of time and trigger a de facto general strike in Berlin. That is why they are trying to intimidate anyone who dares to speak out and protest against the deterioration in working conditions and against war and genocide, threatening them with disciplinary sanctions and dismissal.

On July 12, a tram driver was dismissed after he posted a petition on change.org, which was also published in the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper. In it, he criticised Verdi's contract agreement and called for resistance. His appeal on change.org began with the words: "In the opinion of many drivers and the author of this petition, the 2024 contract sought by the Verdi bargaining commission and the BVG executive represents a degradation of the transport service."

Within a few days, more than 1,400 BVG employees supported the petition. As a result, the initiator, a single father of three children, who has worked for the company for 15 years, was immediately dismissed. However, he did not allow himself to be intimidated and took legal action against the dismissal. The BVG staff council, on the other hand, did not object to the dismissal and thus made it possible.

Another employee was denied a parking space for his car on company premises. The reason given was that the Palestine flag stuck on his car violated legal provisions and regulations.

It is vital to support Andy Niklaus' appeal and continue to build the independent action committee that already exists at BVG. Only in this way can resistance be focussed and developed into a serious, joint struggle.

- Send solidarity greetings to Andy via Whatsapp at +4917641685811 and support his struggle to combine resistance against privatisation, wage cuts and social cuts with the growing opposition to genocide and war!

- Report on your own experiences! Describe the effects of austerity measures, cutbacks and increasing labour agitation on the working conditions in your area and the consequences for the safety of employees and passengers!

The action committee exposes the close cooperation—not to say the corrupt swamp—that exists between Verdi officials and BVG management, as well as the Senate and the Bundestag parties.

The miserable working conditions, unbearable shifts, constantly increasing work stress, low wages for new employees—all of this was approved by Verdi. Its functionaries on the supervisory board and works council act as management consultants and support the rationalisation programmes in the name of improving competition—i.e., increasing profits.

The situation at BVG is becoming more untenable from week to week. Thousands of jobs for drivers and technical staff remain unfilled because nobody wants to put up with the stress

of low wages. Those who are doing their utmost to keep public transport running are becoming increasingly ill.

A few months ago, a BVG staff council member reported to the *Berliner Zeitung* that the "sickness rate used to be 6.5 percent, in the middle of the Corona period it was around 8.5 percent. It is currently officially 12 to 13 percent. Last December, for example, it reached more than 20 percent. On one day, more than 150 of the 572 employees here at Hof Britz were sick. A record!"

Under conditions where Verdi is suppressing any serious and effective strike and industrial action, more and more employees are resorting to their own measures. At the beginning of the week, over fifty underground train drivers called in sick collectively to demonstrate to management the consequences of intolerable working conditions.

The same parties that are privatising public services—including local public transport—and intruding cutbacks to increase for profit are also ruthlessly pushing ahead with military rearmament and the preparations for war. The German government boasts that it has supplied more tanks and heavy weapons and more money to Kiev for the NATO war against Russia than any other European country. Defence Minister Pistorius (SPD) is calling for the use of weapons that can also reach Moscow, even though Russia is the second largest nuclear power.

The German government, Verdi and the BVG board agree that employees should pay up for armament and war. Verdi national chairman Frank Werneke declared on the fringes of the last Verdi congress in September last year: "I am absolutely in favour of creating a special fund [for the Bundeswehr]. This is necessary and 100 billion euros will probably be far from enough."

The danger of a third world war has never been as great as it is today. It is therefore urgently necessary to combine the fight for higher wages and better working conditions with the fight against war, genocide and military armament.

This is what Andy Niklaus called for in his video and this is the central demand of the Transport Workers' Action Committee in Berlin.

Therefore: Take part in building the action committee! The time to get active is now!

Write a WhatsApp message to +491633378340 and fill out the form.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)