

Berlin local transit staff council elections

Transport Workers Action Committee slate in Berlin meets with significant support

Ulrich Rippert
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Since the Transport Workers Action Committee published a statement in support of its candidates for the staff council elections at Berlin's regional transport provider (BVG), a lively discussion has been taking place among workers at the company. Many are making no secret of their anger against the trade union Verdi and their rejection of it. It is well known that the miserable working conditions—unbearable shifts, constantly increasing work stress and low wages—have been approved by Verdi and the previous majority on the staff council.

The Verdi functionaries on the company supervisory board and the current staff council act as management consultants and support corporate cost-cutting programmes in the name of “improving competition”—which is just another word for increasing profits.

With more than 16,000 employees, BVG is one of the largest employers in Berlin. It comprises 13 depots and is managed by the Senate (state government) Department for Economics, Energy and Public Enterprises, which is headed by the former Berlin Mayor and current Senator (state minister) for Economics Franziska Giffey (Social Democrat, SPD). Giffey is also Chairwoman of the BVG Supervisory Board.

The staff council election is highly fragmented. The Action Committee slate is standing in the so-called BO-Nord, which includes the Indira-Gandhi Strasse, Müllerstrasse and Spandau depots. Almost 2,500 employees work in this area, all of whom have the right to vote, regardless of their union membership.

In recent days, supporters of the Action Committee list have spoken to BVG bus drivers in Berlin's Hertzallee. Many drivers have a migrant background. Their families come from Turkey, Eastern Europe, Russia or Middle Eastern countries.

Ahmed said: “‘Verdi dictatorship’ is exactly right. So, you already have my vote. Somehow, I never got along with the Verdi people. I speak my mind openly and honestly, but it's difficult. I've already had problems with Verdi shop stewards. Verdi is more on the side of the BVG than on the side of the union members and employees. They only ever want to save their own chairs, nothing more. After the last agreement I said: The result is no good, just window dressing. If you sell this as a success, you're just showing how weak you are. For five years, we have received less than a 1 percent pay rise every year. Since then, Verdi staff council reps have been avoiding me. At the last election, I

persuaded many colleagues to leave Verdi. This time I'm going to collect votes for you.”

Another colleague, Stefan, pointed out that the Action Committee slate combined the demand for a 30 percent wage increase, 20 minutes of turnaround time and fully paid breaks with the fight against rearmament and war. He expressly supported the demand, “Not a cent for armaments and war! Stop the genocide in Gaza!”

Stefan has been working as a bus driver for the BVG for two years. “The war is an absolutely important issue. I come from Russia and my family is directly affected by the war. There is no one here, or among the Ukrainian refugees, who doesn't know someone who has died or been wounded. In addition, my mother and mother-in-law have difficulties entering Germany. German politicians have declared that Russian nationals could be spies. I ask you: How could my mum be a spy?”

Stefan expressed support for uniting Ukrainian and Russian workers against the war. About the candidates on the Action Committee slate, Andy Niklaus, Ali Mohammed and Velimir Stanojevic, he said: “I know my colleagues. I think it's good that they are addressing the issue of war, and it's really courageous of them to stand up for it. But certain topics are not wanted, you can tell. It is undemocratic to want to ban such statements.”

He continued: “There is no war without financial support. I don't want to know what is happening and what has been agreed behind our backs. The war goes back decades and has a long and complex history. It's just sad that people are being sacrificed for it. In the Soviet Union, where I grew up, the Second World War was at the top of the agenda. Twenty seven million people were killed by the Nazis. That's the official figure, but unofficially? In my family alone, it was unclear at the time what had happened to several family members. Fascism must never happen again.”

“We BVG colleagues are very international,” emphasised Stefan. “I have Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Albanian and Croatian friends. None of us want to go to war for Germany. Maybe that's why they're afraid of us?”

Diana has been working as a bus driver since April this year. She said: “I don't support this war, neither in Gaza and Lebanon, nor in Ukraine. I'm not in favour of this Ukrainian president. Why do you support this Ukrainian government, but not other countries affected by war? What about Bosnia-Herzegovina? An embargo

was imposed on Serbia, then the country was bombed. If what you say is true, that Verdi really supports the war, I will resign. I won't give a cent for these wars."

The election appeal published by the Action Committee states: "Verdi supports this pro-war policy and wants to suppress any opposition to it. 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] now. This is necessary, and 100 billion euros will probably not be enough by far.'"

"That's the biggest mess—that we're still helping to finance all this," said another bus driver, who did not want to give his name. "I'm Palestinian myself and I have a very clear opinion on this. This is genocide and the whole world is watching. Israel is waging war everywhere and nobody is doing anything about it. I understand that there was a history of German fascism with its terrible crimes. But does that mean we have to support the murder? The Israeli government itself is right-wing extremist!"

He continued: "I was born here; my children were born here. I find it outrageous how brutal the police are when you protest. More important than wages is that people no longer remain silent about what is happening down there [in the Middle East]." After the interview, he took a copy of the election appeal with the words: "Finally something sensible, thank you very much."

Attempts at censorship

In view of these positive reactions and much encouragement from BVG workers in favour of the Action Committee list, the management reacted with great alarm. Shortly after Andy Niklaus, together with supporters of the slate, had put up election posters in some depots on the hoardings provided for this purpose, he received a message from the those organising the election.

Niklaus was asked to remove the election posters immediately with reference to a statement from the department management. The demand "Stop the genocide in Gaza!" had no connection to the staff council election and was inadmissible, they said. There is no question that staff council reps, and candidates in particular, are allowed to take a stand on general political issues during election campaigns. Their freedom of expression is even specially protected. The demand "Stop the Verdi dictatorship!" was also problematised.

Niklaus replied to the election organisers that they had no right to exercise censorship. The election organisers were responsible for the conduct of the election and the observance of the democratic rights of all participants and candidates, but not for evaluating the content of their demands. There was no response to his request for them to present the legal basis for their demand.

At almost the same time, the editor-in-chief of Berlin's *Tagesspiegel*, Lorenz Maroldt, commented on the Action Committee's statement. In his blog "Checkpoint," he identified Niklaus and expressed outrage at the demands "Stop the Verdi dictatorship!" and "Stop the genocide in Gaza!"

The "Kraft durch Basis" (Power through the ranks) slate was also outraged that the Action Committee election appeal stated: "We are opposed to the 'Kraft durch Basis' slate, which criticises Verdi but accepts [far right Alternative for Germany] AfD members in its ranks. We strictly reject co-operation with right-wingers and fascists. Anyone who knows the history of labour disputes at BVG—our company was founded almost a century ago in 1928—knows how wrong and dangerous it is to support the right out of anger at the corrupt trade union apparatus."

In a very revealing comment, the spokesman for the slate addressed company management and the legal department directly. He described the Action Committee statement as a "slander" that could lead to "verbal, possibly even physical attacks" and disrupt industrial peace. He wrote: "I ask the employer to ensure the protection of life and limb of our members of Kraft durch Basis."

According to this logic, it is not the right-wingers on the staff council slates that jeopardise industrial peace, but the Action Committee when it warns against them. While members of the Action Committee have not committed any violent acts, "Kraft durch Basis" wants to take action against the critical colleagues together with the company's Executive Board. "It would be better if the slate changed its name to: 'Kraft durch Vorstand' [Power through management]," Niklaus stated.

At an online election campaign meeting last Sunday, Andy Niklaus reiterated the importance of linking the fight against miserable working conditions and for higher wages with the fight against war and rearmament.

He said: "It wasn't us who put the issue of war and rearmament on the agenda. It was the government and the Senate, supported by the BVG management and Verdi, who demanded sacrifices in the name of making Germany fit for war. They have created the link between billions for rearmament and arms supplies with extra profits for the super-rich and drastic austerity measures, inhumane working conditions and inflation for us.

We are not prepared to accept this. We know what rearmament and war mean for us workers. And we say loud and clear: Not again! Two world wars are enough!"



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