

Berlin transport workers election: How to conduct the struggle against the trade union Verdi

Transport Workers Action Committee
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The result of the recent Berlin Transport Company (BVG) staff council election in Berlin has revealed the extent of opposition to the public service union Verdi, the bargaining agent for public transport workers. For the first time, in this election Verdi lost its majority on the staff council in Berlin amongst bus drivers.

This is despite the fact that the Verdi contract commission used upcoming negotiations in January as the basis for a scurrilous election manoeuvre. Shortly before the election, the contract commission surprisingly announced a relatively high demand—a pay increase of €750 per month, plus a driving/rotating shift allowance of €300, plus a shift allowance of €200, plus a 13th month’s salary as a Christmas bonus. Even so, the union suffered a significant loss in votes. The question of how to take forward the struggle against Verdi has assumed increasing importance.

In our Action Committee List election appeal, we wrote, “We are facing major confrontations. The BVG management and the Berlin Senate are planning massive social attacks as part of further privatisation.” This is exactly what is now happening.

Immediately after the staff council election, the Senate announced its austerity plans for next year. The planned cuts total over €3 billion and affect all areas except the police and internal security, the armed forces, and military installations. The budget for the mobility, transport and environment sector alone is to be cut by around €660 million—almost 20 percent of the sector’s total budget.

Drastic austerity measures are being prepared for the BVG. Although Verdi is represented on the BVG supervisory board and its economic committee, and participates in all company planning, precise information is being withheld to prevent protests. Media reports only state that “all areas” of the BVG are affected. Investment is being particularly heavily cut, and 100 million euros are to be slashed from ongoing operations. These amount to cuts of over 10 percent.

Everyone can imagine the impact this will have on working conditions. Even now, vehicles are being used that are in poor condition and sometimes unsafe. Staff absences will further increase pressure at work. The cancellation of subsidies for the purchase of electric buses will also have an impact on working conditions, with loan financing resulting in additional costs and further pressure to reduce spending.

The upcoming contract negotiations will take place under completely new conditions. The Senate, the BVG and the municipal employers’ associations are planning massive social cuts and are relying on Verdi to enforce them against the workforce.

Therefore, our opposition to Verdi, which took very concrete forms in our intervention in the staff council election, must be transformed into a conscious rebellion to break the Verdi dictatorship and take the coming contract struggle into our own hands.

The fact that Verdi has lost its majority to represent bus drivers for the first time is a very important step, but the struggle has only just begun.

First, Verdi still has a majority on the central staff council (GPR), and second, Verdi continues to dominate contract negotiations as the union at the company. Its officials on the supervisory and economic committees continue their intensive cooperation with management and the Senate.

Above all, however, and most importantly, none of the opposition lists standing in the election has a perspective to counter the various manoeuvrings of the BVG management, the municipal employers association (KAV), the Senate and Verdi. To do that, they would have to advocate a fundamentally different political programme directed against the subordination of workers to the capitalist priority of maximising profits.

This was already evident on 19 November at the constituent meeting of the new GPR. Janine Köhler, the previous chairwoman, was re-elected. She has been a Verdi staff councillor for 24 years and has been on the GPR for 12 years.

For the past four years, Köhler has been deputy chair of the GPR. A few weeks ago, she took over as chair following the retirement of Lothar Stephan. Köhler has been a member of the BVG supervisory board for many years and has been involved in all decisions regarding the gradual privatisation of the company, the deterioration of working conditions and the reduction of wages.

In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper, she explicitly spoke out against a struggle against management. Her goal is cooperation, not conflict. She said:

We have to tackle the issues together—with the management of the company. Our task is to discuss them at eye level with the employer, to develop constructive proposals and find solutions. This is not possible if we are in conflict with the employer.

Although Köhler plays a key role in the confusing machinations of the BVG, Verdi, the KAV and the Senate, none of the major critics of

Verdi who stood candidates in the staff council election such as the groups Kraft durch Basis (Rank-and-File Power), Klare Kante or Offene Liste dared to confront her at the constituent assembly.

Although it was known that Verdi has only a slim majority of 16 votes in the 29-member GPR and that there are divisions in the Verdi camp, no one ran against Köhler, either individually or in agreement with other lists. Not a critical word was uttered, and as far as can be seen from the reports, there were no opposing votes, and at most just a few hesitant abstentions from Kraft durch Basis. This is nothing other than cowardice in the face of the enemy and a betrayal of those who voted.

It became clear at this first meeting of the GPR that none of the opposition lists represents an alternative to Verdi. This is an important lesson that will be repeated at future GPR meetings and will no doubt be reflected in the work of the staff council.

The reason for this is not personal, but political. Despite some fierce criticism, all the opposition lists advocate the same programme as Verdi. That is, they all accept the capitalist framework, subordinate themselves to the profit orientation, and spread the illusion that better negotiations will lead to better results.

This attitude completely underestimates the real role of Verdi. It is not just a matter of bad negotiators and corrupt bureaucrats. Verdi is part of BVG management and works closely with the Senate parties to increase profits through intensified exploitation and lower real wages. To this end, the union uses its bureaucratic apparatus, its works councils and its shop stewards to suppress any serious resistance from the employees or allow opposition to exhaust itself with fruitless sham protests.

Verdi and the other unions have transformed themselves into direct agencies of management not merely because their officials are personally corrupt. Rather, this transformation has deep objective causes. The globalised economy is coming into ever sharper conflict with the nation-state system that the trade unions vehemently defend. The more violently the capitalists react to the crisis with trade wars and military action, the more closely the trade union officials close ranks with their “own” state and their “own” corporations, enforcing wage and social cuts in the latter’s interests.

Building action committees in all depots and departments

The significance of our election campaign now becomes clear. We linked the struggle against Verdi directly to the building of independent action committees and explained that a change in the composition of the staff councils does not solve the problem. We wrote that it is necessary to “build new structures of struggle that enable us as workers to intervene directly in workplace disputes.”

The struggle against the prevailing miserable working conditions and the upcoming contract must be understood in their political context. The planned social attacks are closely linked to the official war policy. We already addressed this in our election statement: “The public sector and state-owned companies are being starved of funds in favour of the war policy.”

This is now taking place, not only at the BVG, but also throughout industry. For months, there has been no end to the reports of layoffs and bankruptcies in the auto and auto supply industries. Volkswagen wants to cut 30,000 jobs, and suppliers ZF, Bosch and Schaeffler want to cut tens of thousands more. Just a few days ago, Ford announced the elimination of another 4,000 jobs, including 2,900 at its headquarters in Cologne. And Thyssenkrupp plans to wipe out 11,000 jobs in the steel industry.

The IG Metall union supports all of this. It and the VW works

council have already offered the company savings on wages of 1.5 billion euros.

This frontal attack on all workers is part of fundamental political changes taking place. With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, the struggle for profits, markets and raw materials is taking on new dimensions. This battle is being fought out at the expense of the working class.

Trump is putting together a government of far-right oligarchs. Tesla boss Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, is personally taking on the task of saving \$2 trillion in government spending and slashing everything that does not yield a profit—from education to pensions, social services and health care. Unlimited sums are to be made available only for the arming of the military and the police.

Major corporations and governments in Europe are emulating Trump, attacking the working class and stepping up their struggle for markets and profits. As was the case 90 years ago, capitalism is once again heading to dictatorship and a world war that could wipe out human civilisation if the ruling class is not stopped by the working class in time. NATO is already at war with Russia. Every day it uses more powerful weapons, even at the risk of nuclear war.

The frontal attack on the workers at Ford and VW, at Thyssenkrupp and also at the BVG must be seen in this context. War and a profit-based economy are incompatible with social equality and democracy. Everywhere, Verdi, IG Metall and all other trade unions are playing the key role in implementing the attacks on workers.

In our election appeal, we wrote:

If we do not want to be led like lambs to the slaughter, we must resist these policies and link the fight for higher wages and better working conditions to the fight against military rearmament and war.

At the next meetings of the action committee we will discuss how we can implement this perspective in concrete terms. Check this page for the dates and links to the meetings planned: <https://aktionskomitees.de>

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