

Warning strikes at Berlin's local transit operator BVG

Break with the Verdi union apparatus! Build up the Transport Workers Action Committee!

Transport Workers Action Committee
28 January 2025

The following letter is addressed to employees at Berlin's local transit operator BVG.

Dear colleagues,

The current wage struggle is taking place under completely new political conditions. Our justified demands are facing a comprehensive counter-offensive on jobs, wage levels and social cuts by government and employers.

That is why we must not be satisfied with the current warning strikes, which are being organised by the Verdi union to let off steam and pave the way for a sell-out of our struggle as usual. At all costs, the trade unions, politicians and big business want to avoid industrial action at BVG, as across other sectors and companies, in the midst of the current federal election campaign. We must therefore organise ourselves independently of the Verdi apparatus in order to push through our demands. That is why we are calling on you to join the rank-and-file Transport Workers Action Committee.

The Berlin Senate (state executive) alone wants to save more than €5 billion this year, including over €100 million at BVG. This means huge social cuts and further attacks on our working conditions and wages.

The €100 million are to be raised by BVG itself through new loans, so that the company's debt level will rise to almost €1 billion. If we do not fight back now, we will pay for this with further service cuts, run-down vehicles and dilapidated infrastructure and a further deterioration in working conditions.

This is why the BVG executive board says that our more than justified demands cannot be financed. After all the sell-out contracts of recent years, the absolute minimum we should demand is a €750 increase in basic pay, a rotating shift bonus of €300 for drivers, a doubling of shift bonus from €100 to €200 and an extra month's bonus payment instead of the annual special payment of €1,900.

However, Verdi has no intention of implementing these demands, which were put forward by members in a survey. All cuts by the federal government and the city of Berlin are supported by the union officials. By signing up to the

“Concerted Action“ in the Chancellery in 2022, the Verdi executive board under Frank Werneke had already agreed to pass the costs of rearmament and war on to working people. This resulted in long-term concessions agreements that did not compensate for massive price increases, especially for food, petrol, energy and rents.

Now, the early federal elections are being held to bring a stable government to power, which will push through the next drastic round of wage cuts and social cuts to finance rearmament and war.

The trade unions, including Verdi, are an integral part of this offensive against us. Former Verdi officials are part of BVG management and the KAV municipal employers' association. Verdi representatives sit on BVG's supervisory board and powerful economic committee and work closely with the Senate.

BVG Chief Human Resources Officer Jenny Zeller-Grothe (annual salary €330,000 in 2023) dismissed the staff demands as “not financially viable” and relies on the collaboration with Verdi: “Will there be a solution? Absolutely,” she declared confidently.

The Verdi representatives are now desperately trying to keep control of the industrial action. This is the only reason why Jeremy Arndt, Verdi union secretary in Berlin/Brandenburg and chairman of the contract bargaining commission, announced a possible “all-out strike” if BVG did not meet the wage demands appropriately. If it were up to him, this all-out strike would never happen.

We employees know this only too well. That is the reason why Verdi lost its majority among BVG bus drivers in the staff council elections last November. The decision of the Verdi apparatus to allow a comprehensive participation process among Verdi members in the “current contract bargaining round” is also intended to secure the power of the Verdi apparatus. Feedback on the evaluation of the first round of negotiations by employees was collected up to last Wednesday. There can only be one answer to Verdi's question, “Do you

want to wait and see—or are you prepared to strike to increase the pressure in negotiations so that a negotiable offer is presented?": Yes! However, the workforce must determine what constitutes a "negotiable offer" and what does not.

Arndt himself says that the wage increase demanded would amount to 25 percent and the additional costs for the BVG would amount to around €250 million. This is already a sign of capitulation. Verdi has never agreed to a double-digit wage increase. The last time 200,000 public service employees took strike action was in 1974, when the ÖTV (Public Service, Transport and Traffic) union called for an 11 percent increase—over a period of 12 months.

Today, Arndt says that Verdi expects the "wage dispute" to be as intense as the one in 2008: "Back then, we went on strike at BVG in several waves for a total of around six weeks."

The 2008 dispute was the last full strike by BVG workers, which was intended to secure a 12 percent pay rise for new recruits (9 percent for existing employees) or €250 for one year. In reality, however, the six-week strike was deliberately sabotaged by Arndt's predecessors. Verdi isolated the combative and angry workforce in various waves of strikes and ultimately stalled and sold out their struggle: The demand of 12 percent became a 1.6 percent pay rise signed by Verdi, then as now veiled behind a jumble of sleight of hand and false claims!

In order to push through the current demands in full, the contract bargaining battle must not be left to the Verdi leadership. No negotiations behind closed doors! Online live broadcast for monitoring by rank-and-file workers! Disclosure of all negotiation protocols! Set up action committees to prepare for a full strike!

The mobilisation of employees by building up the Transport Workers Action Committee is also so important because the federal government and the Senate are exerting massive pressure to bring us to our knees. Our contract fight cannot be separated from the current politically aggravated conditions.

The billions in cuts to social services, health, education, culture, wages and pensions that the Senate here in Berlin, the outgoing and incoming federal governments and the big corporations everywhere want to push through are to be channelled into spending more on weapons for the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), arms deliveries to Ukraine and Israel and into the pockets of shareholders.

We are therefore not only confronted with the Verdi apparatus and the employer, but also with the federal and state governments. They are well networked with each other and work closely together against us.

We workers must also network and join forces with other sections of the labour force. For example, we must ensure that our colleagues from the private company Schröder Reisen, which now operates more than 8 percent of BVG bus routes, are not used as strike-breakers.

Last week, the union EVG (Eisenbahn, Verkehr) announced their demands for S-Bahn colleagues (7.6 percent). However,

EVG is aiming to reach an agreement with the Deutsche Bahn rail operator before the federal election on February 23, and well before the end of the no-strike clause in their current contract that expires on March 31.

Currently, 2.5 million public sector employees, 180,000 railway workers, 170,000 DHL and Deutsche Post employees, 100,000 Lufthansa ground workers and bus drivers in Schleswig-Holstein and Baden-Württemberg are also involved in contract disputes. In Stuttgart and many cities in Baden-Württemberg, 9,000 bus drivers are currently on strike for a 9 percent pay rise.

These colleagues are our allies with whom we must network and unite. Our campaign can and must be the prelude to a political offensive against the cuts we are facing. Let's turn the tables.

The Transport Workers Action Committee demands:

- Convene works meetings at BVG to discuss and prepare for a full strike. Strict monitoring of the negotiations.
- Preparation of a joint strike with colleagues from the S-Bahn.
- Establishing contact and planning for a joint struggle with public sector, postal and railway workers.

We also demand the cancellation of the contract concluded last May, which has not seen any improvement in working conditions for us drivers.

Such an offensive would find support, not only among the millions of BVG and S-Bahn passengers who are feeling the effects of the cutbacks in public transport. We would also find support in other sectors and areas. There is hardly an industry in which cuts and redundancies have not been announced, especially in the automotive and supplier sectors.

The prerequisite for this is to take action now. Get in touch with us. Contact us at +491748402566 and use the following form to register for and build the action committee!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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