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Germany

# 27 March 23: "General strike" in the transport sector in Germany

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**The United Services Union (ver.di) is in the middle of several rounds of collective bargaining in the areas it organises. The first was the collective bargaining round at the Post/DHL, which ended on 14 March with a mediocre agreement, despite the fact that the employer, Deutsche Post group had made more profits than ever before.**

Since the beginning of the new century, there have been several collective agreements in the public sector. There are collective agreements for individual sectors as well as a collective agreement for the federal states. This is the result of deregulation, but also because of the austerity policy of the last 30 years.

The collective bargaining round for the federation and the municipalities is the one in which ver.di is best able to push through its demands. In the municipalities, the strongly organised parts of ver.di are the ones that were able to organise the necessary pressure in previous bargaining rounds. These include workers in local public transport, at the airports, in waste collection, at the public utilities, but also in hospitals or in day-care centres (Kitas).

Ver.di demands a wage increase of 10.5 % at least €500 per month. It was probably clear to everyone that this would not be easy, especially since the two big industrial unions IG Metall (IGM) and IG Bergbau Chemie Energie (IG BCE) reached very modest agreements last year without much activity.

## Negotiations without results

In the two rounds of negotiations so far, at the end of January and in February, there were no serious offers from federal and local government. As a result, ver.di stepped up its activities so that on every day in March there were one or more warning strikes in different regions. [1] As a result, the collective bargaining round got a lot of media coverage and gained broad support among the population, even though trams and buses remained in the depots for up to 10 days and many day-care centres remained closed.

In February, the Railway and Transport Workers' Union (EVG) set out its wage demands for the year: a 12% increase in wages, at least €650 per month. The first round of negotiations ended after a few hours; the EVG leadership said they would organise strikes to reinforce their position. This is very unusual for this union, as within the spectrum of individual unions in the DGB (German TUC) it is considered rather tame and close to the board of Deutsche Bahn AG (German railways).

From mid-March, the idea circulated to organise a joint strike day in the transport sector at the beginning of the third round of negotiations in the public sector on 27 March. This idea was initially received with much scepticism, as it is very unusual in Germany for different trade unions to fight together.

This scepticism gave way more and more to concrete preparations, and on 23 March the leaders of the trade unions EVG and ver.di announced their plans for a common day of action at a press conference. It was clear that on Monday, 27 March, there would be a strike in many regions, more or less nation-wide, at the airports, on the railways, in the ports, on the canals and across local public transport. Afterwards, the public debates came thick and fast, some media started a massive agitation against this strike. This was of no use, however, as public opinion largely supported it.

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On 27 March, public transport throughout Germany came to a standstill. Airports had to cancel almost all flights, railway signallers made sure that nothing ran, lock keepers brought shipping traffic on the canals to a standstill, in the cities there were no trams or underground trains, only the buses of private bus companies ran. The feared chaos on the motorways and in the big cities did not materialise, as many employees took leave or, where possible, worked from home. Thus, considerably less traffic jams were reported on that day than on normal Mondays. The agitation of some newspapers - first and foremost the BILD newspaper - thus totally failed and this strike day was a complete success for ver.di and EVG.

According to Frank Wernicke, president of ver.di, 70,000 new members joined the union during the warning strikes at the post office and in the public sector. Trade union activists can argue credibly: when people fight, the trade union movement becomes stronger again.

PS: In the night of 29-30 March, the third round of negotiations between the "employers" on the one side and ver.di and the German Civil Service Federation on the other side was declared a failure by the unions. As a result, the Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser of the Social Democrats (SPD), announced that the "employers" would call for arbitration.

PS:

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[1] In recent years there has been a development of enforcing demands through "warning strikes". At ver.di, these are usually all-day strikes called in different sectors. Only when it is thought that it is not possible to reach a result are negotiations declared to have failed and ballots have to be held among the members. A majority of 75% is required, then there can be indefinite strikes. In both warning and indefinite strikes, unions pay "strike pay", but not to all strikers, only to their members.