INTERVIEWS 15.11.2021

'Without the pickers and the riders nothing works'

The Gorillas scandal in Germany has demonstrated the importance of union work. Daniel Nikolovic on why platform workers can trust big trade unions

Trade unions are taking a stand against the poor working conditions in the so-called platform economy. But all over the world they are having major difficulties organising employees in this area. In Germany, the service provider Gorillas has just dismissed 350 employees because their 'wildcat' strike was not covered by German labour law. The trade union Ver.di is now helping the Gorillas Workers Collective (GWC). What is going on here?

> With the layoffs, the company has harmed itself because without staff, Gorillas can no longer keep its delivery promise — ten minutes! In the fierce cut-throat competition in the industry, rivals are taking advantage of the situation. Gorillas is now spending even more money than it already was. By the way, this was not the first wildcat strike by Gorillas employees. Only this time, the company has responded with layoffs.

When employees stand up for improving their wages and working conditions, it's their structural power that — that is, how much pressure they can generate by withdrawing their work. The company's problems show that this power is strong, isn't it?

> Absolutely, without the pickers in the warehouses and the riders who are meant to take the goods to someone's front door in ten minutes, nothing works. So I don't expect that many of those dismissed will pursue a case to be reinstated, even though the notices of termination are probably not legal. Most have long since found new jobs in the sector. Gorillas' competitors are reacting with better pay and open-ended contracts.

First, however, they lost their jobs, and the position of workers in the platform economy is by no means so good everywhere. What was the

reason that the strikers did not use the organisational power of Ver.di, for example, and the institutional power of the employees, the protection provided by labour law that, after all, makes legal strikes possible? Is there a fundamental alienation between the mostly young employees in these industries and the major trade union organisations and the state?

I need to take a step back here. The riders and pickers at Gorillas were initially in discussions with our sister trade union *Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten (NGG)*. In addition, around the Workers Collective there are other organisations and consultants such as FAU *(Freie Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Union)*, which want to organise themselves as an umbrella-type trade union. When Ver.di offered its support, that was met with a certain amount of suspicion fuelled by poor external advice. Thus, for example, the consequences of certain actions were not explained to the employees. The large amount of media attention in favour of the Gorillas employees has also then certainly contributed to some thinking that they neither need the support of the big trade union nor the complicated German strike law and could win the conflict in direct and spontaneous ways. Unfortunately, that all went wrong and the employees who were affected were left without any protection.

In the cooperation between Ver.di and the Gorillas Workers Collective and all the other employees, it's above all about mutual trust. Activists and many employees identify very closely with the Workers Collective, although it is not homogenous and there are different wings. In Germany, trade union work is successful whenever working conditions are improved together with the employees and, above all, our members. Just as, for example, it is gradually succeeding at Amazon. But what they exepcted from us was different: Ver.di should only intervene as a service provider, 'legalise' the strike after the event — which is not possible — print flyers, and otherwise keep a low profile. But that is not the way we understand successful trade union work in action.

Have you succeeded, in the meantime, to build up mutual trust?

There've been ups and downs but yes, there is now an election board, which is preparing the election of a works council, which is due to take place in November. But the suspicion — that Ver.di 'is taking over' the GWCs and only wants to win new members — is still there. In that sense, we can only win a dispute with the company management if we can call on, where needed, sufficient members to strike to push through the employees' demands.

The democratic culture of the activists as well as the voting processes

with their advisors, which are also following their own agendas, took up a lot of time. For example, it must be clear that an election board is not a political body, but must keep to specific legal rules on the path to founding a works council and a trade union with negotiating power, which can then also legally strike. We hope that our works council will be accepted. Employees and activists of GWC need to get to know each other better. There is no specific Ver.di list for the works council, but a few of our members are standing.

What impact does it have that many employees have a migration background, don't speak German or don't speak much German, and maybe have other perspectives on trade union work and strikes?

95 per cent of the communication must take place in English. That is also a challenge for Ver.di because, for example, legal texts and other important materials are not available in English and *ad hoc* translation is sometimes difficult. This is of course a long way away from the quick successes, which seemed possible to some at the outset, also because of the large amount of media attention. On top of that, underneath the democratic culture of the GWC with different wings and more or less marked political convictions, there is a certain suspicion towards big trade unions.

What have you learnt from international experiences of trade unions in the platform economy and what can be done better?

Quite clearly you need a trade union organiser with a background in the sector. That's coming. In addition, solid knowledge of the sector's business model is necessary. And it's very important to have a better and, above all, the right approach for communicating with employees, who are working part time in several precarious jobs and therefore don't have much time. First, the communication with the Gorillas riders and pickers was by email and that didn't work well. Now we are successfully using Telegram Messenger. There, tools for translations and voting procedures are needed so that you can get to stable decisions more quickly.

The interview was conducted by Thomas Greven.



Daniel Nikolovic
Berlin

Daniel Nikolovic is a political trade union secretary in the national retail department of the trade union Ver.di.

-