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Germany

# **‘Two worlds colliding’: Berlin transport workers and climate activists unite over rights**

Saturday 2 March 2024, by [CONNOLLY Kate](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2024).

## **Two groups are striking for better working conditions and investment in Germany’s underfunded public transport**

*Kaja Schwab, a Fridays for Future and #WeDriveTogether activist, joins Johnny Kiele, a Berlin tram driver, at a picket line. Photograph: Kate Connolly/The Guardian*

At first sight, the gathering in an office complex in east Berlin resembles a self-help group. But the public transport workers and climate protesters sitting in a semi-circle introducing themselves have been thrown together, they say, to fight for a common cause.

“Hello, my name is Erdogan. I’m a bus driver in the northern zone of Berlin and have been in the job for 32 years. I’m glad someone is finally taking our profession seriously,” says one.

“My name is Stefan,” says another. “I’m a student and a climate activist and happy to have met some of the drivers without whom we wouldn’t have any chance of tackling the climate emergency.”

The groups – the transport workers who are represented by one of Europe’s biggest trade unions, and the climate campaigners who are members of Fridays for Future – will on Friday stage their first coordinated national strike in Germany.

Under the banner #WirFahrenZusammen (we drive together), they are appealing for better working conditions and huge investment in Germany’s overburdened and underfunded public transport sector.

“It does feel a bit like a self-help group – but we’re all in it together,” says an activist, passing round a bag of sweets at the meeting on Thursday.

Claudia, a tram driver, pipes up from the back of the room: “We’ve been on our own for far too long.”

She and other drivers have a litany of complaints: timetables so tight they don’t allow for one toilet break in a nine-hour shift; customers spitting with anger because the trams are late; the humiliation of unpaid break time; and having just one free weekend in every six to spend with family.

The workers of the BVG, Berlin’s transport authority, are demanding first and foremost better conditions, citing stress-related illness as one of the main reasons a large percentage of workers

have quit their job in recent years, leading to a less reliable service.

*Police in Berlin detain a climate activist in Potsdamer Platz in October. Photograph: Sean Gallup/Getty*

The backing of Fridays for Future has, they say, given the workers' campaign a new lease of life – and a new sense of purpose through the recognition that they are pivotal to any serious climate policy.

"It's time we got together," Claudia says, "even though, I admit, it's like two worlds colliding."

Ilhan Saritas, 55, who has been a bus driver for six years, says he was initially sceptical when told about the collaboration between his trade union, Verdi, and the #WeDriveTogether campaign. "The climate protesters, they're the selfish, privileged ones, I thought, who slow my bus down by cycling in the bus lane and failing to abide by the rules."

*Public transport workers demonstrate in Erfurt, Germany, in a nationwide wage dispute. Photograph: Martin Schutt/AP*

But, he says, "I have come to see them as our allies. They have the experience of protesting their hearts out on the street. We are behind the wheel, literally, of any climate transformation. If the politicians want people to get out of their cars, they're reliant on us. Only they have to make the job less stressful by investing more. The climate protesters have given us a new perspective on our role."

The protests, which started on Monday in locations across Germany, are demanding an investment of €16bn a year, and a doubling in public transport capacity by 2030.

Kaja Schwab, who joined Fridays for Future in her home town of Hanover in 2019 when she was 15, explains how the pandemic took the wind out of the sails of the movement. #WeDriveTogether is a way of giving it new momentum, she says.

"The pandemic was also a time for a lot of us to reflect, and that's when we realised we've managed to push this topic into the middle of society – but there's still a lack of real political action on it," she says.

Disappointment in the role the Green party has played since entering Olaf Scholz's coalition government in 2021, as well as a growing sense of societal divide, coinciding with the rise in popularity of the far-right, have also spurred the group on, says Schwab.

"What with the split in society and the rise in the cost of living, with people not worrying so much about the end of the world but how they are going to manage until the end of the month, #WeDriveTogether is a timely way of combining climate protection and social justice."

*Climate activists attempt to disrupt the Berlin marathon in September. Photograph: Christian Mang/Getty Images*

At the start many public transport workers were sceptical, she says. "But within two months we were standing next to each other on the picket line warming our hands together at the brazier."

Although in its infancy, the German initiative has already spawned offshoots in the Netherlands and Austria. "We hope it'll spread further still," says Schwab, who studies social science at Berlin's Humboldt University.

Johnny Kiele, 32, who joined the BVG as a tram driver four years ago, says: "Initially, we thought why on earth would we work with climate protesters? Then they started collecting signatures on our behalf and we were impressed by their enthusiasm and their interest in us."

Melina Carls, a doctor who is a Fridays for Future activist and one of its communication officers, says initial conversations were often terse and brief. "But once we started opening up to one another, I remember one bus driver telling me, no one's ever taken an interest in me or my job before. He cried and thanked us for taking an interest in him."

"For us as a movement, used to concentrating on the big picture, it's been really humbling to be confronted with the banalities of daily life, like being able to take a toilet break."

**Kate Connolly** in Berlin

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## **P.S.**

- The Guardian. Fri 1 Mar 2024 06.00 CET:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/01/two-worlds-colliding-berlin-transport-workers-and-climate-activists-unite-over-rights>

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