

The German rail strike and the lessons of the Telekom betrayal: Build a mass movement against the grand coalition government!

Editorial board
6 July 2007

The number of working days lost through strike action in Germany for the first six months of 2007 is one-and-a-half times higher than the annual average over the last ten years, and if protest actions continue at the same rate, this figure will be much higher by the end of the year.

The increasing readiness to strike shows that broad layers of the working population are no longer prepared to accept an endless stream of attacks on their living standards and social rights—attacks which have continued for more than two decades. A certain upturn in the German economy marked by rising profits and inordinate increases in the salaries of managers has encouraged workers to demand the return of part of the wages they have been docked in recent years. The six-week strike at Deutsche Telekom and the recent labor dispute by railway workers are just the tip of the iceberg.

It is against this background that the unions have taken over the job of blunting workers' militancy and reining in strikers. The contract signed last weekend by the Verdi union with Deutsche Telekom is a scandalous sellout. Any union putting its signature to such a deal has lost the right to describe itself as an organization defending the interests of its members. The union is, in fact, nothing more than an disciplinary instrument operating at the behest of management and a straitjacket for its members, who not only are robbed of their incomes, but required to pay union dues to boot.

In mid-May, 96 percent of those Telekom workers affected by new management plans voted in favor of strike action and their dispute met with broad popular support. The response by Verdi was to restrict the strike action to short-term localized actions, which did no real harm to the company. For six weeks the union ran the strike in such a manner as to be as ineffective as possible and thereby isolate the strikers. In the end, Verdi agreed

to a deal which corresponded all along the line to the ultimatum laid down by the Telekom executive.

The agreement imposed wage cuts of 6.5 percent plus four hours per week of unpaid work on 50,000 workers, and a reduction in income of up to 25 percent on new employees. The deal is unique in the history of post-war Germany. One would have to go back to the final days of the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s to find any sort of parallel. At that time, the government resorted to paragraph 48 of the Constitution—the emergency decrees of the president of the Reich—in order to carry out similar attacks on workers' wages and conditions.

Now, in the railway workers' dispute which began this past Monday, the two main unions, Transnet and the GDBA, are preparing to tread in the footsteps of Verdi.

The incestuous relationship between managers, union functionaries and Social Democratic Party (SPD) politicians is just as prevalent on the board of German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) as is the case at Telekom. The executives of both companies consist of management and union representatives. In fact, union and works council board members occupy over half of the seats.

A number of those on the employers' side are also SPD members. Heading the DB board is Werner Müller, the economics minister in the previous SPD-Green Party coalition government, while at Telekom, every important decision is vetted by the current finance minister, Peer Steinbrück (SPD), and Labor Minister Franz Müntefering (SPD). At DB, Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (also SPD) oversees all major decisions.

This web of corruption, overseen by the SPD, is impenetrable. Decisions are made behind closed doors long before the public gets to hear of them. The Transnet/GDBA demand for a 7 percent wage increase by no means covers the losses of past years, and everyone

knows that the unions are “ready to compromise.” The final outcome, with all of the provisions included in the fine print of the eventual agreement, is bound to turn out negatively for railway workers.

The Transnet functionaries have a problem, however, with militant train drivers organized in their own union, the GDL. This relatively small union opted out of a contract agreement with the other unions six years ago following a series of concessions accepted by Transnet and the GDBA.

The GDL is now calling for a wage increase of up to 31 percent. On Tuesday morning it demonstrated how it was possible to organize effective strike action, as opposed to the limited actions of Transnet and GDBA. Train drivers paralyzed large parts of the country’s rail network for a four-hour period.

Such militancy can only be welcomed. The reproach by Transnet, which accuses the GDL of a lack of “solidarity” with other rail workers, is utterly cynical. Whoever breaks out of a straitjacket that imprisons others is breaking chains, not solidarity.

The immediate result of the action by the GDL was to raise the issue of the miserable remuneration of rail workers before a broader public. It suddenly became clear that the highly trained driver of a modern high-speed ICE express, costing millions, earns no more than an unskilled worker.

Even the economics section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which could hardly be accused of left-wing sympathies, commented: “Who is prepared to work for any period of time, doing shifts, for 2,100 euros (net) per month, working on occasion mornings, evenings, nights, and with regular shifts on weekends? According to the railway company, a married train driver earns, on average, 2,100 euro...including vacation, Christmas and all other extra pay. This is barely enough to support a family, particularly in city centers where rents are expensive.”

The demand raised by the GDL for a starting wage of 2,500 euro gross is therefore anything but extravagant. At the same time, however, the GDL represents a limited and sectional standpoint on the basis of which it is impossible to realize such a demand. The union has supported social cuts in the past and will be unable to withstand the pressure exerted on its members from all sides. As was the case last year with the doctors’ union, the Marburger Federation, the GDL bureaucracy will inevitably agree a putrid compromise to ensure its own interests.

The railway workers are not merely confronted with a greedy management that can be forced to back down

under pressure. DB Chairman Hartmut Mehdorn has the backing of the German grand coalition government, consisting of the SPD, the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union, which is determined to completely denationalize the railways and relentlessly promote the interests of big business.

The connection between government policy and attacks on wages and working conditions is becoming ever more evident. With its draconian cuts on social benefits (the Hartz laws), the previous SPD-Green government led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) created conditions where a better-paid skilled worker could be left destitute within a short period of time should he be made redundant. Since then, the current grand coalition has stepped up the offensive against the welfare state and employers have used the threat of redundancy and the Hartz laws to impose massive wage cuts, longer work weeks and attacks on working conditions.

Only a broad *political* movement, drawing in large layers of the population—industrial and clerical workers, the unemployed, young people and pensioners—can conduct a successful offensive against this government. The rail workers’ strike must be made the starting point for an offensive in which workers unite across different industries and throughout Europe, and break with their old national reformist organizations in the course of a struggle for the socialist reorganization of society. The control of production must be removed from the grip of a financial elite and placed at the service of society as a whole.



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