

# The political issues posed by the German train drivers' struggle

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The four-hour strike by train drivers at the beginning of July that brought large parts of the country's rail traffic to a standstill came as a surprise for many. After years of trade union protests, which the labour bureaucracy restricted to impotent demonstrations involving whistle-blowing and drum-banging—while union officials organised one sell out after the other—the warning strike by train drivers provided a glimpse of the power and militancy of the working class and the mass opposition that exists to the assault on living standards and conditions of German workers.

Two weeks after the walkout, however, train drivers find themselves in a perilous situation. There is the distinct possibility that their dispute will end in a miserable compromise and defeat. For them to continue their campaign, it is necessary to soberly work through a number of key political questions.

A principal reason for the increasing difficulties facing train drivers is the role played by two other railway employee trade unions, Transnet and the GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwrter), which have openly functioned as strikebreakers. From the very start, these two trade unions opposed the train drivers' demand for pay increases of up to 30 percent—although they were well aware that such wage rises were entirely justified for these workers who have enormous responsibility for the safety of crews and passengers. Currently, German train drivers earn between 1,970 and 2,142 euros per month.

To isolate the train drivers, the executive of German Railways (DB) offered rail workers represented by Transnet and the GDBA an increase in basic wages of 4.5 percent—far more than they had expected. Two days after the deal had been struck, it became clear that these two unions had agreed to a special clause in the contract, which stipulated that German Railways should make no concessions to the train drivers' trade union—the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokfhrer). According to its terms, if management sought a separate agreement with the GDL, the deal struck with Transnet and the GDBA would be automatically nullified.

There has rarely been such an open display of strikebreaking by the German trade unions. Having made their own deal with management—achieved largely as a product of the militancy of

train drivers—the Transnet and GDBA inserted this special clause to pit their own members against the train drivers.

A second clause in the agreement stipulated that GDL members would be denied the wage increase awarded in the Transnet/GDBA contract if the union refused to sign up to the same deal. This clause was also aimed at increasing pressure on the train drivers.

The German Trade Union Federation (DGB)—whose chairman Michael Sommer sits together with the head of Transnet, Norbert Hansen, on the executive board of German Railways—used all of its influence to argue that according to the principle of “trade union solidarity,” Transnet was the only organisation that could represent all railway personnel. This merely turns reality upside down. In fact, Transnet is systematically working to divide railroad workers and blackmail the train drivers who are still in dispute with DB.

At the same time, Transnet has advised the DB executive on the most effective means of legally prohibiting the train drivers' dispute. On the basis of suggestions from the union, the company executive successfully appealed to German courts for a ban on further strike action. When the GDL sought to overcome the legal ban by specifying the demands of its dispute, Transnet intervened once again, and is now arguing for a blanket ban on any future strikes by train drivers.

The role of Transnet and the GDBA cannot simply be explained on the basis of the friendship between Transnet boss Norbert Hansen and the chief executive of the DB, Hartmut Mehdorn—as some GDL officials have declared. This turn to the right by the trade unions is also not simply a product of the lucrative financial benefits enjoyed by Transnet and GDBA representatives sitting on the DB executive and other company committees, although such payoffs provide an incentive to sabotage workers' struggles.

Of more importance, however, is the fundamental impact of the globalisation of production on the trade unions, which has effectively undermined the basis for the German system of “social partnership” between management and the trade unions. During the post-war period, when labour markets could be largely regulated by national laws and contracts, the trade unions had some room in which they could exert pressure on companies for improvements for their members—although such

improvements were strictly limited and usually of short duration. The internationalisation of production has wiped out the basis for such compromises.

The trade unions now see their main task as increasing the international competitiveness of the companies in which their members work and, on the basis of defending so-called “industrial bases,” have agreed to contracts involving major reductions in wages and benefits. Just a few weeks ago, the service workers’ trade union Verdi implemented a contract deal that involves longer working times at reduced wages for Telekom workers—despite the militancy of its members, who had overwhelmingly voted for strike action.

At the same time, the strikebreaking role played by the Transnet and GDBA unions is directly bound up with their support for the privatisation of the railways. In a statement drawn up in October of last year, Transnet declared that the union “offers the federal government its advisory services with regard to the definition of the content of the privatisation law.” Upholding the sanctity of profit making, the union added, “The economic stability of the DB and its competitiveness in Germany, Europe and worldwide are just as relevant for job protection as the securing of existing contract rights.”

The biggest problem confronting train drivers is that the GDL is guided by the same political perspective. It is no coincidence that up until 2001, the GDL was united with Transnet and the GDBA in a joint contract agreement. In 1994, the former state-owned enterprise was turned into a corporation and split up into nearly 200 subsidiaries—with devastating consequences for wages and working conditions. Productivity increased by 180 percent while expenditure on personnel fell by 28 percent. In the 1990s, DB slashed almost half its workforce—a total of 150,000 jobs.

The GDL quit its joint agreement with Transnet and the GDBA six years ago in response to the discontent of its members over the constant concessions made by the unions. But the current low wages and miserable working conditions for train drivers—in particular, their complex and demanding shift work—is a direct result of the bankrupt policies of the GDL leadership.

The head of the GDL, Manfred Schell, is a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and represented his party as a deputy in the German parliament in the middle of the 1990s. During this time, he voted against plans for privatisation of the railways but in fact raised no principled opposition to privatisation. His demand for a “clear increase in incomes” for train drivers is based on the argument that the current low wage levels are an obstacle for the recruitment of new young train drivers. This is an argument that is shared by sections of management.

Despite all the rhetoric, the fact that the GDL leadership ordered a pause in strike action for more than a week is a clear signal to the DB executive that the union leadership is open to major compromises. In fact, the GDL bureaucracy is seeking to

use differences over privatisation within the various political parties to achieve some minor wage improvements principally as a means to preserve the existence of the bureaucratic apparatus of the trade unions. This policy of compromise can only lead directly to defeat.

There are certainly many train drivers who reject the opportunist orientation of their leadership, but any conception that trade union militancy is sufficient to prevent a sell-out is misconceived. The low wages and deteriorating working conditions for train drivers and other railway workers are a direct result of preparations by the DB to launch itself on the stock market.

Although this next stage in the privatisation process is opposed by many rail workers and a large majority of the population, the DB executive committee and the German government—in particular, the Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee of the Social Democratic Party—are determined to press ahead. In other words, the fight of the train drivers has direct political implications and can only be carried out successfully when train drivers make their own dispute the starting point for a broad political mobilisation against the privatisation policies of the German government and for a genuine socialist alternative.

This calls for a fundamentally new political strategy. Vital social achievements such as the railway system cannot be sacrificed to the profit interests of a financial aristocracy but must serve the interests of society as a whole.

As a prelude to any further action, the GDL has declared it will hold a ballot of all members. Talks between GDL representatives and the DB broke up Thursday without a resolution. The GDL continues to insist on a separate deal and a pay increase “in double figures” and plans to hold a ballot for further strike action next Monday. Train drivers should vote overwhelmingly for a continuation and intensification of their protest while seeking the support of other sections of workers in Germany and abroad in a struggle to break with the old reformist trade unions and the SPD, based on the fight for a socialist reorganisation of society.



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