

The political way forward for the German train drivers' struggle

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The current conflict between train drivers and the management of German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) contains important political lessons for all workers. It is not possible to counter the systematic attacks being mounted on the wages and social rights of the working class without drawing these lessons.

After years of continuous cuts to wages and deteriorating working conditions train drivers are now demanding a wage increase, which at least partly seeks to recover past losses. In doing so they have been confronted with a broad front of opposition, which includes the DB executive and the big business interests that stand behind it, the German government, courts and media, as well as the railway trade unions—Transnet, GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwärter)—and the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB—Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund).

The fact that the trade unions collaborate with management to undermine the wages and working conditions of their own members is not new. One only has to recall the conflicts of recent years, which saw the union leaderships play precisely such a role in the case of Opel motors, Siemens, Deutsche Telekom, the public service and others. The treachery of the unions has reached a new height, however, in the train drivers' conflict with DB.

Transnet and the DGB have been transformed into yellow trade unions in the purest sense of the term—organizing strike-breaking and a provocative campaign against the train drivers. The chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, has publicly condemned the strike. The legal advisors attached to Transnet have advised DB management on the legal measures which can be taken against the train drivers, and traipsed from one German court to the next until they finally found a judge who was prepared to declare their strike illegal.

In other words, from the outset the train drivers have been confronted with the concentrated power of the state and the German grand coalition government (Christian Democratic Union—CDU, Christian Social Union—CSU, and the Social Democratic Party—SPD) and the DGB has served as its direct tool against the striking workers.

In the face of this train drivers voted by nearly 96 percent to strike and have not been intimidated thus far by the considerable threats made against them.

At the same time, the train drivers union—the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer)—has demonstrated its inability to conduct an effective resistance or offer an alternative political road. The trade union leadership headed by Manfred Schell reacted to a membership strike vote by pulling back and desperately seeking a compromise.

After the success of the first lightning strike by drivers, the GDL organised only limited action. The strike ballot, the counting of the votes and the announced date of possible action were dragged out over

a period of weeks. Schell repeatedly signalled his readiness to negotiate and finally suggested an arbitration procedure involving the former CDU general secretary, Heiner Geißler—despite the fact that there exists no arbitration agreement between DB and the GDL. DB management then made their own proposal for an external arbitrator—Kurt Biedenkopf, another senior member of the CDU with close links to big business.

Although prominent experts in labour law, such as Wolfgang Däubler from the University of Bremen, declared the argumentation used by the Nuremberg Labour Court banning strike action to be “completely inadequate” and its provisional ban on the strike “legally untenable,” the GDL accepted arbitration and agreed to postpone any strike action until August 27.

The purpose of the arbitration procedure is merely to increase public pressure on the train drivers. Both Geißler and Biedenkopf will invariably arrive at a decision in favour of the DB management and it is already clear that the arbitration talks are the first step towards a rotten compromise and sell-out.

Many train drivers reject this compromise and are seeking to continue their struggle. The most important lesson from the events of the past weeks, however, is that the fight for better wages and working conditions cannot be successful if it is kept within the confines of the traditional means of trade union struggle.

Train drivers and the working class as a whole confront political tasks. Today it is the train drivers; tomorrow other sections of workers who are driven to oppose permanent social and welfare cuts will be thrust into a confrontation with the same bloc of the government, judiciary and the DGB.

The globalisation of the economy has stripped away the basis for a policy based on social reconciliation. Globally operating financial trusts, which control modern economic life, are determined to extract the last ounce of profit from the working class in order to satisfy their insatiable hunger for dividends and wealth.

The trade unions and the SPD have reacted to the bankruptcy of social reformism by lining up unconditionally with big business in order to defend “German interests”—i.e., the interests of the German banks and major concerns in a highly competitive world arena. The consequences are ferocious attacks on workers' wages and rights and the growth of militarism and rearmament.

Train drivers therefore can place no trust in so-called independent arbitrators, the state, other national institutions or the occasional political representatives who express some sympathy with their demands. They must mobilise support amongst other railway employees and sections of the working class. The militancy of the train drivers, which has been greeted by broad layers of the German

population, must be made the starting point for posing completely new political tasks and challenges.

This requires a fundamentally new socialist political strategy, which places the needs of the broad masses above the profit interests of the major concerns and banks. Production in general and such important services as the railways must be removed the grips of a financial elite and placed at the service of society as a whole.

This can only be achieved on the basis of workers breaking with their old, national organizations and uniting on a European and worldwide basis to pursue the struggle for a socialist reorganization of society. The construction of such an international socialist party is the aim of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (in Germany, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG).

The miserable wages and working conditions endured by train drivers have not emerged overnight. They are the result of a political strategy pursued for a long period by all of Germany's official parties, which has sought to reduce the living standards of the working class in order to enrich the corporate owners and biggest stockholders.

The coalition of the SPD and Green Party, which came to power nine years ago, sharply accelerated the process of wealth redistribution in Germany. The coalition introduced a series of tax cuts to benefit companies and banks while at the same time introducing laws, such as Hartz IV, which rationalised unemployment pay and social welfare in order to create a pool of cheap labour and push down wages.

In the face of growing popular opposition, which took the form of 11 successive losses in state elections for the SPD, chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) handed over power to Angela Merkel (CDU). Since then the SPD has continued to pursue its anti-social policies as a junior partner in Germany's grand collusion. These reactionary policies have received the full support of the DGB and its affiliates.

It is also necessary to make a critical assessment of "The Left" party. The founding of this party through an amalgamation of the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) and the West German Election Alternative group (WASG) is a response to the rapid decline of the SPD. Its leaders include Oskar Lafontaine, who held many leading posts during his 40 years in the SPD, and Gregor Gysi and Lothar Bisky, who both have their roots in the Stalinist ruling party of the former East Germany, the Socialist Unity Party (SED). These leaders are hostile to any movement of the population that threatens, or even questions, the capitalist profit system.

Lafontaine, Gysi and Bisky are determined to prevent such a movement and are desperately trying to revive illusions in social reformist policies. While praising the policies of post-World War II SPD leader Willy Brandt—who implemented limited social reforms in the 1970s, the leaders of The Left are using their posts in the Berlin Senate and municipalities such as Dresden to organise and impose welfare cuts.

A basic policy plank of The Left is its support for the DGB. The Left is trying to breathe new life into the trade unions, which have been discredited by their links to the SPD. Lafontaine and Gysi have remained remarkably low-profile during the train drivers dispute. Only the deputy leader of the party's parliamentary fraction, Klaus Ernst, expressed his support for their demands, while at the same time calling for an "all-embracing contract"—the main demand raised by Transnet and the GDBA. It is no coincidence that Transnet boss Norbert Hansen was an official guest at the founding conference of "The Left."

The fierce campaign by the rail managers, the government, the judiciary and the DGB marks a new stage in the class struggle. The

fact that a company can race from one industrial court to the next until it finds a judge ready to ban the strike makes a mockery of an independent judiciary.

The argumentation of the Nuremberg Labour court—that strikes "in the main travel period could cause immense economic damages"—is a direct attack on the constitutional right of association, from which the right to strike is derived. The same argument can be used tomorrow against all strikes that extend beyond the toothless protests organised by the DGB, which include symbolic and impotent lunchtime strikes. One would have to look back to the blatant class law practised in the era of the German Reich, the Weimar Republic or the Nazi regime to find an adequate parallel to the legal abuse mounted in the current dispute.

The real class relations are emerging with ever greater clarity: domestic policy is guided by the interests of the wealthy; foreign policy is once again dominated by the struggle for markets and resources between the Great Powers; and the judiciary is shedding its neutral clothes and emerging as the naked instrument of class repression.

Characteristically the president of the German Employers' Association, Dieter Hundt, called for a broad ban on strikes just a few days after the Nuremberg court decision. He urged constitutional changes in order to prevent "labour disputes by small occupational groups." Hundt demanded, "A strike by a sectional trade union for a minority of the workforce must be declared legally untenable and therefore impermissible, if there is already a collective contract for the entire workforce," otherwise the entire autonomy in contract bargaining is "acutely threatened."

Until now autonomy in contract bargaining meant the non-interference of the state in tariff conflicts. Now employers are interpreting such bargaining to mean the legal recognition only of those DGB trade unions that are prepared to impose the most regressive labour agreements on their members. Any attempt to break out of this straitjacket is to be banned and criminalised.

In this respect the despicable strike-breaking role of Transnet and the GDBA during recent weeks is the rule rather than the exception. Across the globe the trade unions are offering their services as a force for maintaining order by working to suppress any independent movement of the working class. This is the direct and logical result of their reformist program, which is aimed at the maintenance of capitalist relations.

The way forward for the working class requires breaking free from the dead end of such policies and building an independent political movement of the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist program. That is the program of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit.



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