

German trade unions step up strike-breaking in train drivers' dispute

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The management of German Railway (Deutsche Bahn—DB) has taken fresh steps to increase pressure on railway workers as 12,000 train drivers and conductors ballot over strike action. In undertaking his offensive, DB Chairman Harmut Mehdorn is relying on close collaboration from two unions representing railway workers—Transnet and the GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwärter).

Both organisations have carried out strike-breaking in a shameless fashion unprecedented in German postwar history. From the very outset, they have adamantly opposed the demand raised by train drivers for a salary increase, although they are well aware of their current miserable wages and working conditions, which include gruelling shift work and high levels of responsibility.

The provocative strike-breaking role of Transnet and the GDBA is also being fully supported by the German Confederation of Trade Unions (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund—DGB).

In July, German Railway agreed to a pay increase of 4.5 percent and a single payment of €600 for railway personnel. The contract was agreed on rapidly in order to isolate train drivers, who had made a separate claim for a higher salary increase. The contract accepted by the two railway trade unions, Transnet and the GDBA, contained a clause that stipulated that DB should not make any concessions to the train drivers organised in their own union—the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer).

The clause specifically stated that should DB make a separate deal with the GDL, then the contract already struck with Transnet and the GDBA would be rendered invalid. The clause was nothing less than a form of extortion, insisted upon by Transnet and aimed at forcing a capitulation by the train drivers.

On the basis of a recommendation from the head of Transnet, DB executive Norbert Hansen then sent a letter to all of its 136,000 employees requesting them to state whether they were members of a trade union and, if so, which union. This letter was aimed at excluding members of the GDL from receiving the pay increase and the one-off payment of €600 agreed on for other railway workers. It should be noted that Hansen is ideally suited to advise the German Railway on how to break the train drivers' strike. In his function as head of the Transnet union and in keeping with Germany's corporatist industrial policy, Hansen sits on the board of DB as deputy chairman—and receives a handsome salary for doing so.

Now, in cooperation with legal experts attached to Transnet, German Railway has launched a series of legal measures against the train drivers' trade union. In no fewer than eight separate judicial procedures, the company is seeking to ban the union from calling a strike. In yet another legal action, the company is seeking to prevent the union from even organising a ballot on strike action—although this is the form laid down by German industrial law for the conduct of a labour dispute.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last weekend, such a move was “outrageous, because strike ballots belong to democracy.” While the term “outrageous” is justified, it applies not only to DB Chairman Mehdorn, but also to Transnet and the DGB. These trade unions are supporting and actively participating in criminalising a labour dispute. This represents a new dimension in the rightward shift of the trade unions.

Should the courts declare the GDL's preparations for strike action illegal and police seize ballot boxes during the next few days, this will all take place with the express support of the DGB. Train drivers or

conductors who oppose the legal action and attempt to defend their basic democratic right to strike are to be dragged into court and prosecuted—in accordance with the wishes of Transnet and the DGB.

This turn to the right by the DGB and its constituent trade unions has far-reaching political implications, not limited to the current train drivers' dispute. The train drivers have put forward entirely justified demands for a wage increase in relation to the rising cost of living and their difficult working conditions. Up to now, they have refused to back down, although they are confronted with a combined front consisting of the government, major business concerns and the trade unions, which together have imposed increasingly draconian social cuts at the behest of big business.

There can be no doubt that in the future, other layers of the working class will take similar action. The policies of Germany's grand coalition government (Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party) are broadly hated, and popular opposition to its policies is growing. Under conditions in which all of Germany's leading parties collaborate in a coalition that carries out policies exclusively in the interests of the German ruling elite, any effective form of opposition must assume an extra-parliamentary form and develop outside of Germany's traditional postwar path of social partnership—i.e., close collaboration between company management and the trade unions.

The DGB has now made clear that it is determined to prevent such a development at all costs. It is offering its services in order to nip it in the bud or, when necessary—and in direct collaboration with the state—suppress any independent movement of the working class. This is the real significance of the support now being proffered by the unions for legal measures against the train drivers' dispute.

At the same time, train drivers are themselves unclear about the political dimensions of their dispute. This is directly based on the stance of their trade union, the GDL, which has declared that it regards its conflict with DB management as a “normal wage dispute” while seeking to use the strategic role of train drivers to arrive at a better deal than Transnet. The GDL leadership and its chairman, Manfred Schell, are also trying to exploit differences that exist among German political parties with regard to the forthcoming

privatisation of German Railway, but at the same time have refused to take a principled stand against such privatisation. Instead, it hopes to obtain a settlement that not only represents an improvement for drivers, but more importantly protects the existence of the trade unions and its bureaucratic apparatus.

The wave of legal actions and threats of bans, together with the intimidation exerted by the DGB, make clear that the dispute has much wider political dimensions. The opponents of the strike regard the train drivers' dispute as a prelude to much more widespread social conflicts and are seeking to intimidate and quell any resistance to the grand coalition government.

Train drivers can only carry forward their dispute when they are fully aware of the political issues at stake and make their current campaign the starting point for a broad political movement against the government. In particular, the strike-breaking role of Transnet and the DGB has to be put at the centre of the dispute. Train drivers should establish contact with the members of other railway unions and mobilise them against the strike-breaking activities of the Transnet leadership.

An intensification of the train drivers' dispute must also draw other sections of railway workers into a struggle against the plans by the DB management and the government—under the direction of Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD)—for the privatisation of the railways. The initial steps towards privatisation have already had massive consequences, with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

Above all, it is necessary to break with the opportunist policy of social partnership and take up a socialist perspective, which places the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business and the banks.



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