

Germany: Social Democratic chairman attacks train drivers

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Following the nationwide strike by train drivers on Thursday last week, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) chairman Kurt Beck directed a fierce attack against the strikers and their union.

Speaking to the *N 24* news station, Beck said the Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer (German Train Drivers Union, GDL) was using brute force to gain special treatment for itself without consideration for others. The GDL represents only a “small percentage of rail staff” and only a “small section of train drivers”. This minority was trying to break away from the “solidarity” of all those working for the railways.

The other rail unions Transnet and GDBA had reached a reasonable settlement, he said, “and some now want special treatment without consideration for others.” Beck demanded the management remain firm and not give way.

With his attack, the SPD chairman has placed himself at the head of a campaign by politicians and a majority of the media, together with the DGB union federation, to slander the striking drivers, isolate them and force their surrender.

During the strike on Thursday, camera teams from all channels interviewed hundreds of waiting commuters and other travellers, in order find those who opposed the strike. On Friday, the newspaper headlines were nearly identical: “Majority against GDL strike” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), “The mood in the population changes” (*Frankfurter Rundschau*), etc.

But this was still not enough: Beck’s attack is aimed at stirring up a witch-hunt against the striking train drivers. Threatening letters have been received in the past days at several railway stations, and management instructed railway security staff not to intervene in incidents and violence on the part of travellers that was directed against the strikers. At Berlin’s Ostbahnhof station, the strike committee called off its pickets because their security could not be guaranteed.

It is necessary to powerfully oppose the strikebreakers in the SPD and trade union headquarters and to defend the train drivers’ dispute.

What most infuriates Beck and the DGB leaders is the fact that the train drivers have broken away from a system of collective bargaining with the DGB union Transnet and the civil service staff association GDBA (that also represents some

drivers), which have agreed to the systematic dismantling of jobs and the lowering of real wages in past years.

The “solidarity” of Transnet and the GDBA consists of their close collaboration with the Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Railways) board and support for the privatization plans of management and the federal government. Transnet boss Norbert Hansen is the deputy chairman of the DB supervisory board, and is sumptuously rewarded for this position.

Since the rail “reforms” of 1994, half the jobs on the railways have been destroyed, and the present workforce of 185,000 still faces further cuts. Workloads have constantly increased, while incomes have stagnated, sinking by ten percent in the last two years. These worsening conditions were all deemed “socially acceptable” by the unions, which agreed to them in new contracts that bear the signatures of Transnet and the GDBA.

The job cuts and constantly worsening conditions have resulted in Transnet losing many of its members, to the point that it is no longer able to finance its own bureaucracy. Recently, a television documentary uncovered the fact that there is a tacit agreement between Transnet and the rail management for Transnet functionaries and full-timers on the various works councils to be funded secretly by DB. In return, Transnet lobbies in support of the privatization of the railways and works hand in hand with the DB board. The television report called Transnet, “Mehdorn’s tame trade union” (Mehdorn is the railway CEO).

Except for an indignant declaration against such internal matters being made public, Transnet has so far not made a single statement to factually disprove the documentary.

But this “solidarity” with management is not limited to Transnet. Another union chairman who never tires of attacking the striking drivers and denouncing them for breaking “solidarity” is public sector union Verdi boss Frank Bsirske. Two years ago, he was responsible for pushing through the public service collective agreement (TVöD), which meant significantly worse conditions for those employed by federal, regional and local government. Before that, he had agreed to the dismantling of 3,000 jobs in Berlin’s urban transport system and a ten percent wage cut.

This spring, when 50,000 employees of Deutsche Telekom opposed being hived off into a low wage in-house company,

Verdi limited the strike to symbolic protest actions. The union then swung into action to push through the hiving off and forced staff to agree to work an extra four hours each week while their wages were cut. In this case, neither Beck nor the DGB protested against the fact that Telekom staff were being divided and that those that had been hived off had a separate, substantially worse collective agreement. They only speak about “solidarity” when it comes to preventing wage increases.

There are almost unlimited examples of this kind of “corporate solidarity” and “social partnership”. Eighteen months ago, when it became known that IG Metal union representatives at Volkswagen in Wolfsburg had enjoyed junkets paid for by management, in return for agreeing to wage and job cuts, it became clear that was not an exception, but a rather particularly blatant form of the rule.

It is to be welcomed that the train drivers have quit this united front of welfare cuts. Their wage demands, which have been wrongly represented in many media reports quite deliberately, together with their demand for an independent collective agreement, are fully justified. At the beginning of June, the *World Socialist Web Site* already noted, “Those who break out of a straitjacket in which others are imprisoned are not breaking solidarity, but chains.”

The hysterical barrage that is now being directed from all sides against the train drivers is meant to intimidate and silence everyone who dares to fight against the constant worsening of working and living conditions. That is why it is so important to give the drivers’ strike every support possible.

With his tirade against the engine drivers, the SPD chairman has also revealed how his conflict with his party colleague, employment minister Franz Müntefering, should be understood.

The controversy between the two SPD leaders has filled the media for several weeks. Beck demands changes in the Agenda 2010 welfare and labour “reforms”, albeit to a very limited extent. Older workers should receive unemployment pay for some months longer than is presently the case. Müntefering has expressed his firm opposition to such a move and warns of a “softening of the labour market reforms”.

Despite his differences with Müntefering, Beck remains committed to the principles of the Agenda 2010. Like Müntefering, Beck is also interested in maintaining the coercive measures embodied in the “Hartz IV” laws that force skilled workers to accept low-wage jobs after being unemployed for just a short time. And what Beck thinks of the unemployed was made clear some time ago, when, on a tour of his hometown Mainz, he berated an unemployed person, saying he should get a wash and have his hair cut in order to find work.

Beck’s gaze is directed toward the DGB. He has accepted the unions’ demand to extend unemployment benefits in order to bind the DGB bureaucracy more closely to the SPD. Also, more recently, some union functionaries had moved towards the Left Party of Oskar Lafontaine. Beck fears that a political split would weaken the DGB, and regards such a development

as dangerous. Since the train drivers’ strike heralds a radicalization of broader layers of society, the SPD leaders regard the trade union apparatus as an extraordinarily important instrument for implementing the social attacks.

The drivers’ strike thus contains an important political lesson. It makes clear that the struggle against inhuman working conditions and wage and job cuts requires a political break with the bureaucratic apparatuses of the SPD and the DGB trade unions. This also applies to the Left Party, which is closely connected with the DGB bureaucracy and is seeking to co-operate with the SPD on a number of levels.

It is impossible to avoid a struggle with the SPD and the DGB bureaucracy, as sections of the GDL are trying to do. The readiness to strike and militancy of the engine drivers are to be welcomed, but this can only be maintained and developed by a political perspective that is opposed to the corrupt politics of social partnership.

In addition to preparing further strike measures, a political debate must be launched about a fundamentally new political strategy. Instead of the profit interests of big business, the needs of working people must be made central and socialist objectives must be pursued. Production generally, and in such important enterprises like Deutsche Bahn, must be taken out of the control of the financial aristocracy and be placed into the service of society as a whole.

In this regard, it is important to make contact with the striking railway workers in France and striking postal workers in Britain.

A society in which the chairman of DB and his eight board colleagues could increase their incomes by over one hundred percent to €20 million, and at the same time radically worsen the working conditions and wages of their staff is neither social nor democratic. A reorganization of society in the interests of the overwhelming majority of working people requires European and world-wide co-operation and the building of an international socialist party.



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