Germany: Train drivers need a new perspective

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More than three months after its first warning strikes, the German train drivers' union (GDL) has called nationwide walkouts for October 5.

In August, GDL members voted overwhelming for industrial action—with 95.8 percent supporting an unlimited strike. Since then, however, the union bureaucracy has spent the past eight weeks in compromise discussions, conciliation negotiations and a secret high-level meeting with Deutsche Bahn (German railways) chief Hartmut Mehdorn.

In the meantime, it has become clear that Deutsche Bahn was never really interested in reaching a compromise but wanted to teach the more militant sections of railway workers a lesson. Management has used the compliant stance of the GDL to prepare systematically for a strike by developing emergency plans and deploying strikebreakers.

Chief Personnel Officer Margret Suckale said this week in Berlin that Deutsche Bahn would do everything "in the interest of the customers" in order to limit the effects of the strike. It would oppose the planned strike "by all means." Newsweekly *Der Spiegel* quoted a board member saying "the thing had to be fought out now, even if it is painful at first."

A spokesperson said the company would seek to maintain over half its operations in the event of a strike. "In the next weeks, travellers will still be able to use the railways regularly," he said. "More than half of all trains will still be running despite the industrial action."

Deutsche Bahn plans to do this by deploying engine drivers that have civil service status (and are thus legally prevented from striking), as well as using members of the Transnet and GDBA unions, which have already agreed to a contract. Just over 25 percent of all train drivers are organised in Transnet and GDBA, with about 30 to 40 percent of all drivers having civil servant status, including many GDL members.

In addition, Deutsche Bahn has taken out newspaper advertisements during the last two weeks seeking some 1,000 new engine drivers. It claims to have already found around 800 suitable candidates. There was also talk of bringing in engine drivers from Austria and Switzerland, who could replace GDL strikers at short notice. The use of drivers with insufficient training and knowledge of the routes would only be possible by largely ignoring current safety regulations.

However, there can be no doubt that Deutsche Bahn has used the last weeks to make ready for industrial action and is no longer trying to avoid a conflict. It has obviously decided to inflict a defeat on the drivers.

A comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Monday concluded, "The single-mindedness with which the management is confronting this core demand [the GDL's demand for its own contract] points to the fact that they are currently less concerned with settling the conflict than with finishing off the GDL."

Deutsche Bahn has also undertaken new legal proceedings against the strike. In the summer, it went from one court to another until it finally found a judge who would outlaw the strike on the grounds of the economic damage it might cause. Although expert opinion was that the judgement had little chance of being upheld, the GDL refused to seek an appeal and voluntarily renounced taking strike action at the time.

In the past weeks, railway boss Mehdorn has sought to embarrass GDL chairman Manfred Schell. New contract offers were regularly leaked to the media even before the GDL knew about them. In one case, a GDL representative who sought to attend a Deutsche Bahn press conference to find out about a new offer was thrown out by security staff.

In conciliation discussions under the auspices of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians Kurt Biedenkopf and Heiner Geißler, both sides had agreed that in future the GDL would only represent drivers and would relinquish its representation of other railway staff. However, Deutsche Bahn's subsequent proposal made no reference to a contract specifically for GDL drivers. The proposals also never exceeded the 4.5 percent wage increase that management had already agreed to on August 6 with Transnet and GDBA and which it has since sought to impose on the GDL.

Last week, Mehdorn told the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* he was "immediately" making an offer of approximately 10 percent. On Thursday, he then met with GDL chair Schell for private discussions. Afterwards, Schell called Mehdorn's offer the "joke of the week" and said it was an "affront." The management would pay an additional 5 percent on top of the 4.5 percent increase already offered, if drivers worked two hours longer each week—a zero-sum game.

"Staff shortages already mean drivers face a mountain of overtime and work till they are exhausted," commented Schell. "They simply can't do any more."

There are several reasons for Deutsche Bahn's confrontational course.

On the one hand, the federal government and employers' associations fear that the engine drivers' wage demand—for pay increases of up to 31 percent and a cut in the number of hours worked each week from 41 to 40 hours—could set an example. For 20 years, real wages in Germany have been sinking or stagnating, while productivity has been rising and business profits and speculative gains on the stock exchanges have increased. The demands of the engine drivers speak to the situation and sentiments of broad layers of the population who no longer accept the constant redistribution of wealth from the bottom of society to those at the top. In opinion polls, more than 70 percent of respondents support the drivers' strike.

On the other hand, the train drivers' demands challenge the privatisation plans developed by railway boss Mehdorn and transport minister Tiefensee. To make Deutsche Bahn attractive for future shareholders, Mehdorn must prove that the enterprise is profitable and that he has its staff under control.

Mehdorn has succeeded in the first, thanks to the support of the Transnet and GDBA unions, which support the privatisation plans unreservedly. The extensive concessions the two unions have agreed to covering pay levels, working time and shift rosters mean Deutsche Bahn has moved out of deficit to become a highly profitable enterprise.

The GDL quit its joint contract bargaining with Transnet and GDBA in 2001 because the concessions they had accepted went too far, and has since then faced bitter opposition from these two unions. Transnet and the

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GDBA now stand unreservedly on the side of Deutsche Bahn in the conflict with the engine drivers.

Transnet boss Norbert Hansen has already called on his members to strike-break. “Our members will not let themselves be abused as strikebreakers, but will do their duty,” he said. Since management intends to alter the rosters in such a way that drivers prepared to take strike action are not even scheduled for work, “doing their duty” means that Transnet members will take over the jobs of the strikers.

For weeks, Transnet and GDBA have been agitating against the demands of the GDL. Following the first token strikes, they signed an agreement on July 6 including a wage increase of 4.5 percent, taking the wind out of the sails of the engine drivers. It contains a clause under which their contract becomes invalid if management agrees to a separate contract with the GDL. Since then, Hansen has been openly threatening to cancel the agreement he signed in July covering 134,000 employees if Deutsche Bahn makes any concessions to the engine drivers.

The GDL has nothing with which to oppose this united front of government, big business, Deutsche Bahn management and the other unions. GDL boss Manfred Schell has twisted and turned for weeks, hoping desperately that management would be ready to reach a compromise.

He is still trying to keep the strike on a low flame. The GDL has given Deutsche Bahn plenty of warning by announcing the strike for this Friday long in advance, so that management has had ample time to prepare. For the time being, the strike will be limited to one day: “We assume that one day will be enough for this industrial dispute,” Schell said on Monday—an absurd conception in view of the experiences of the past weeks.

The drivers could paralyse the railways, producing enormous economic pressure. According to calculations by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), the complete shutdown of the rail network would cost the German economy up to a half a billion euros per day. The drivers could count on the solidarity of broad layers of the population and on those members of Transnet and GDBA who are indignant about the strikebreaking being organised by their own unions.

But just like the two other unions, the GDL also wants to make sure there is no broad mobilisation that could get out of its control and develop into an open conflict with management and the federal government. They are primarily concerned with their own status and privileges.

GDL boss Schell has shown he is largely ready to drop demands for better work time and pay if the GDL is granted the status of an independent contract-negotiating partner. His main concern is not attaining the drivers’ wage demands, but achieving this status with management. This is paramount while everything else is negotiable.

As an independent contract partner, the role of the GDL would be substantially strengthened within the company. At present, it can be pressured by the substantially stronger Transnet. For example, unlike Transnet, the GDL does not have its own member on the company’s supervisory board.

The GDL also does not take a principled position on the question of privatisation. Schell, a former member of the Bundestag (federal parliament), constantly points out that he was the only CDU member to oppose the privatisation of Deutsche Bahn. At the same time, he supported the privatisation of the post office and Deutsche Telekom, which had a devastating effect on the wages and working conditions of the respective workforces.

In the meantime, the GDL can expect to gain some advantages from railway privatisation. It enjoys a substantially stronger position in smaller private businesses than with Deutsche Bahn, and has negotiated contracts that are far below the level at Deutsche Bahn. If Deutsche Bahn is floated on the stock exchange, the GDL advocates the splitting up of train operations and the rail network infrastructure, something that is also supported by the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI) and the Free Democratic Party.

If the present industrial action remains under the control of the GDL, it will inevitably end in a devastating defeat that would also have a lasting effect on other railway staff and large sections of the working class.

The engine drivers must establish committees that will take the leadership of the strike into their own hands. They must turn to members of the other rail unions, mobilising them against the strikebreaking activities of Transnet boss Hansen and Co. And the strike must be expanded to the entire railway network for an unlimited period.

Above all, it is necessary to draw the political lessons of the failure of the GDL and the transformation of Transnet and the GDBA into strikebreaking organisations.

The rightward turn of the trade unions and the social reformist parties is an international phenomenon. The globalisation of production and the hegemony of internationally operating financial cartels have undermined the policy of social reformism. The trade unions and the Social Democratic Party react by placing themselves unreservedly on the side of big business in order to defend “German interests”—i.e., the interests of the German banks and corporations—in a violent struggle on the world arena. The results of this are militarism, increasing state powers and aggressive attacks on workers’ wages and rights.

The defence of workers’ incomes, as well as of social and democratic rights, requires a fundamentally new political strategy, one that does not make the profit interests of big business the measure of all things, but places the needs of working people at the centre and so pursues socialist objectives. Production in general, and particularly in such important enterprises as Deutsche Bahn, must be taken out of the control of the financial aristocracy and placed in the service of society as whole.

This can be only achieved if workers break with their old, national organisations and unite across Europe and internationally to fight for a socialist reorganisation of society. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) pursue this goal, the building of an international socialist party.

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