

German train-drivers strike:

Deutsche Bahn increases intimidation of train-drivers

Editorial Board
17 October 2007

Following a one-day strike by train drivers last Friday that paralysed large parts of the suburban and regional railway network, the executive committee of Deutsche Bahn (DB-German Railways Board) presented a new offer to the German train-drivers union—the GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer)—on Monday.

The new offer differs only in one point from DB's previous offer: DB agrees to a one-off payment of a maximum of 1,400 euros to compensate drivers for unpaid overtime work. The current practice includes overtime in a working-time account, so train-drivers are now to be paid for something to which they are already entitled. According to the deputy chairman of the GDL, Günther Kinscher. "These are payments which had to be paid to train-drivers in one form or another."

Otherwise, the new offer remains same: a pay increase of 4.5 percent and a single payment of 600 euros, in line with the deal already agreed on this summer with two other trade unions representing railway personnel, Transnet and the GDBA, plus an additional 5.5 percent, if train-drivers agree to work 43 instead of 41 hours per week in the future.

DB management also claims it has fulfilled one of the main demands of the GDL, for a separate contract. DB spokesperson Margret Suckale told the press on Monday that DB management was prepared to finalise its "own contract agreement" for train-drivers. Such a contract, however, must "be accommodated without conflict or contradiction into the entire railway contract framework."

The GDL has turned down the offer. GDL chairman Manfred Schell declared that the offer contains "basically nothing new." DB had put forward an offer, "which we have already rejected."

Schell called the new offer a "deceit." Train-drivers had had their "own" contract for years, he said. What the GDL in fact is demanding is an "independent" contract.

The difference is more than semantics. The GDL's main concern is contract sovereignty—i.e., it wants to be able to negotiate independently of other unions over working times and wages. Suckale, on the other hand, stressed that the GDL would have to negotiate "within the framework of a unified contract," including other trade unions.

The offer made by DB demonstrates that the company is unwilling to make any concession to the train-drivers, who are demanding a pay increase of up to 31 percent, a decrease in working hours from 41 to 40 per week and improved working-time regulations. The offer to recompense drivers for overtime already carried out verges on a provocation. Even a DB speaker was forced to concede: "We have a substantial lack of train-drivers. They carry out the overtime anyway."

Nevertheless, the GDL has provisionally called off all further strike action and has agreed to meet with the DB executive committee on Wednesday for further discussions.

GDL boss Schell has once again signalled that he is ready to accept a

substantially lower pay increase if management agree to an independent contract. This would secure the future of his organisation, which has only about 35,000 members and is overshadowed by the far larger Transnet. In other words, Schell is ready to sacrifice the demands of train-drivers in order to secure the organisational interests of his trade union apparatus.

Deutsche Bahn is using the spinelessness of the GDL in order to isolate and crush the train-drivers. Although 96 percent of the GDL membership voted for unlimited strike action at the beginning of August, the trade union has repeatedly postponed any effective action in its search for a rotten compromise.

Last week, it appeared that it would be no longer possible for the union to avoid an outright confrontation. DB boss Harmut Mehndorn spoke of "war" and made it impossible for the GDL leadership to back down without a massive loss of face. Mehndorn's declaration made clear that DB was never interested in a compromise but was instead seeking a confrontation with a militant section of its workforce.

In so doing, Deutsche Bahn has the backing of big business federations, the German government, the railway trade unions Transnet and GDBA, and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) itself. They are all fearful that any success for the train-drivers could open the floodgates and encourage other sections of workers to push for higher wages. After two decades of stagnating or declining wages, under conditions of increased workload, combined with huge increases in profits and management salaries, broad layers of the population are no longer prepared to tolerate such a re-division of wealth from the poorly paid to the wealthy.

Despite a concerted campaign by political circles and the media to discredit the train-drivers, support for their struggle within the population remains high. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted last week: "It is interesting that the anger of Germans is obviously not yet directed unanimously against the train-drivers, although they are demanding up to 30 percent more wages and have threatened, and on occasion, paralysed the country's rail transport. The number of those who nevertheless support the unruly employees in the driver's cab remains considerable. And this despite the fact that political circles and the media have to a large extent set their sights on the train-drivers."

It was under such circumstances that the government decided to intervene. The popular support for the train-drivers was registered with alarm by government circles, which feared that any intensification of the conflict via an unlimited strike by train-drivers could unleash other forms of social protest.

Last Thursday, Werner Müller, who represents the government (the sole owner of Deutsche Bahn) on the company's supervisory board, organised a high-level conference in Berlin. Müller was economics minister in the previous German government led by Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party) and is currently the chief executive of the energy

concern Ruhr Coal AG. Taking part in the discussions with Müller were the GDL chairman Manfred Schell, the chairman of Deutsche Bahn, Hartmut Mehdorn, Transnet head Norbert Hansen and Transport Undersecretary Jörg Hennerkes (SPD), representing the government.

In the course of the discussion, the DB executive agreed to submit a new offer on Monday. According to some sources, the GDL responded by agreeing not to strike during the rest of the month of October—although the union denies giving such an assurance.

The readiness to strike on the part of train-drivers was such, however, that the GDL was unable to prevent a one-day strike in suburban and regional networks, which had been announced prior to the Berlin talks. The union then refrained from calling off the strike after the discussions Thursday in an attempt to allow its membership to let off steam.

The strike call was largely adhered to. Deutsche Bahn resorted to instructing its officials and non-GDL members to replace the striking train-drivers in order to ensure the running of at least a part of the network. According to the DB, 50 percent of regional and suburban trains failed to run. The GDL puts this figure at approximately 85 percent.

Members of the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with the train-driver Ayhan Demir during last Friday's strike at the main station in Essen. Between 80 and 90 train-drivers were on strike in the city, and Ayhan Demir proudly reported on its consequences: "A great deal of the network has been brought to a stop. Although only 40 percent of railway workers here are organised in the GDL, two thirds of all suburban railways and 50 percent of the regional trains have been brought to a standstill in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia."

What do you think of attempts to impose a judicial ban on the strike?

That stands in complete contradiction to the German constitution (Basic Law). I find it incomprehensible for German judges to conclude they can set aside the Basic Law and ban our strike. This has nothing to do with the rule of law. Just the argument used (by the courts) of disproportionateness is also incomprehensible. A three-hour strike is declared—that's three hours, not three days, or three weeks—and then a ruling is made that this is "disproportionate" and causes considerable damage to the company. This is incomprehensible.

The Railways Board also has its allies in the government.

The Railways Board has its allies in politics and its allies in the media, also because it pays the latter large sums for advertising. That is a network, which one has to recognise. I do not understand why an employer signs a clause in the contract agreement that is completely binding. When the GDL is able to achieve more than the 4.5 percent agreed to by Transnet, then the latter's contract is useless. Then they can put forward new demands. When one signs such a clause as did the head of DB, then it must be on the basis of political calculation. One is no longer dealing with a normal wage dispute. It is a campaign to destroy the GDL.

What do you think is behind such a campaign?

This has nothing to do with normal wage bargaining; it is a political dispute. Naturally, Mehdorn would prefer to float the company on the stock exchange with trade unions that play along and are faithful, rather than with a trade union that steps out of line. That is logical.

Last year, Deutsche Bahn made a surplus of 2.6 billion euros, according to Mehdorn's own figures. His own salary doubled in the space of a year, and the incomes of the entire railway executive committee have risen by 300 percent since 1994. In contrast, our demands are quite modest. The claim that we are excessive in our demands is entirely polemical, but that is part of the game. The competition between different railway companies circles around the issue of expenditure over personnel.

What is the level of popular support for your action?

I must say that the majority are entirely supportive. It is very rare to encounter any negative reaction, and even those who have loudly complained about us usually come around after a short discussion. The

fact that there are some opposed is entirely due to the distortions spread by the media. But when one explains the facts to people, then they understand.

What is the state of affairs with regard to wages and shift work?

There is very irregular shift work with not even such regulated shifts such as 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., or 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. The shifts are completely irregular and include working on weekends and holidays. Most people assume that we earn about the same as pilots, but the fact is that we earn much less. It was not broadly known that according to our contract we take home between 1,500 and 1,600 euros.

German train-drivers earn far less than their European counterparts. But that is also kept secret from the public, and the workload has also increased as a result of the first moves towards complete privatisation.

The same development is to be seen in other branches such as German Telekom.

That is correct. I have heard that the Dutch subsidiary of the German Post does not even pay the legal minimum wage. In Germany, it has agreed to a minimum wage and calls upon its competitors to keep to the same level. Big business is just doing everything it suits and demanding more regulation or deregulation—whatever is best for its interests.

The WSWs also spoke with a group of GDL members holding an all-day strike demonstration at the main station in Frankfurt-Main. Several train-drivers were acquainted with a leaflet produced by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party, which had been distributed widely amongst train-drivers and railway travellers. The drivers expressed their approval with the contents of the leaflet.

Tim C., who has worked for eight years as a train-driver in Frankfurt, doubted that the one-day strike would induce the DB executive to give in. The media and politicians were only interested in preparing the railways for its launch on the stock market. It was no easy matter to effectively oppose such a campaign.

"The media are probably not so free and independent as it always maintained. In interviews and on television, they regularly speak out on behalf of the stock market," he said. "They also never explain that behind the offer of a 10 percent wage increase allegedly made by DB, 5.5 percent of the increase is tied to working longer hours."

He explained the strikebreaking role carried out by the biggest of the railway trade unions, Transnet, and its chairman, Norbert Hansen, with the words: "One cannot fill the post of deputy supervisory board chairman at DB—with the corresponding financial remuneration—and at the same time represent the interests of union members."

He also expressed his criticism of the delaying tactics and handling of the strike by the GDL leadership. "One cannot say really that the GDL is proceeding in a very professional manner. They make it comparatively easy for the DB executive to counter our actions."

He reported on a declaration of solidarity by Belgian railway workers, who promised to refuse any additional duties in the cross-border train network and stressed: "A pan-European trade union for train-drivers would no doubt represent a strengthening and considerable step forward."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact