

# Support the German train drivers' struggle against Deutsche Bahn!

Socialist Equality Party of Germany  
11 October 2007

*The following statement was issued in leaflet form to coincide with industrial action planned by German train drivers for the end of this week.*

The conflict between train drivers and the German Railways Board (Deutsche Bahn—DB) has gone well beyond the limits of a typical contract dispute. Deutsche Bahn is determined to teach a militant section of its workforce a lesson and smash the train drivers union, the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer). This is why DB is stubbornly refusing to make any concessions. It has the support of the German government, the courts, the main business federations and Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), Germany's national trade union federation.

If the DB is successful in its campaign, the dispute will have serious consequences for all workers. Any movement of resistance to wage and welfare cuts and the redistribution of wealth from working people to the rich will be subject to intimidation and persecution. A defeat for the train drivers would open the flood gates for further attacks on all workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) calls upon the entire working population to close ranks with the train drivers. Do not permit the DGB-affiliated unions to isolate the train drivers, who are being put under enormous pressure by DB management and persecuted in the courts.

Establish solidarity committees and make the struggle of train drivers the starting point for a broad offensive against wage and welfare cuts, and against the grand coalition government of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) in Berlin.

The chairman of Deutsche Bahn, Hartmut Mehdorn, has endlessly denounced the “unreasonable” wage demand of the train drivers. In doing so he has the broad support of the media. In fact, train drivers are seeking only to reclaim part of what they lost in recent years.

Since the reform of Deutsche Bahn in 1994, the workforce has been halved to 185,000. The workload has risen correspondingly, while wages have stagnated and, over the past two years, actually fallen.

The result is an oppressive labour regime involving constant shift work, in return for an income that is inadequate for a single person, let alone a family. The gross salary of a train driver amounts to a maximum of 2,142 euros per month. Following deductions, drivers are left with an income of between 1,500 and 2,000 euros. In neighbouring Switzerland, train drivers earn approximately twice as much.

The GDL demand for a starting salary of 2,500 euros gross, rising over an extended period to 3,000 euros, together with a shortening of the work week from 41 to 40 hours, is entirely justified. Such an increase would cost DB 250 million euros per year. This sum represents exactly a tenth of the surplus of 2.5 billion euros which the once-highly indebted enterprise earned last year—at the expense of the workforce.

Mehdorn's own salary rose 100 percent last year to 3.18 million euros. The eight members of the DB executive took home a combined salary of 20 million euros. Since three quarters of their income consists of efficiency bonuses, they earn their fortunes directly from the sacrifices

extorted from the workforce.

The situation with regard to Deutsche Bahn reflects the reality of society as a whole. Wages for German workers have been stagnating for the past twenty years, while management salaries, corporate profits and windfalls from speculation have soared. Now the train drivers are to be taught a lesson to ensure that this orgy of self-enrichment can continue! This process has not yet peaked, as demonstrated by the ever-accelerating accumulation of obscene levels of wealth by the financial aristocracy across the Atlantic.

In the US, the auto workers' union, the UAW, has just signed a contract with General Motors (GM) that halves the wage for new-hires to \$14 (barely 10 euros) per hour. The wage reductions, together with massive cuts in social security benefits, are expected to reduce GM's labour costs by two-thirds. In return, the UAW was recompensed with control of the auto workers' retiree health fund, worth tens of billions of dollars. This turns the trade union into one of the biggest speculators on Wall Street, and promises to make the union functionaries very wealthy people, irrespective the ongoing decline in membership dues.

The trade unions are likewise supporting attacks on their own members. They have been transformed from workers' representatives into co-managers, whose only criterion is the profitability of the company.

Two other rail workers unions, Transnet and the GDBA, support DB's plans for privatisation and have backed the reduction of personnel and wages carried out in recent years. Now they are advising the DB executive committee on the best way to break the train drivers' strike and are calling upon their own members to scab. In this pursuit, no lie is too big! Transnet has denounced the train drivers as “contract bashers” and accused of them of disrupting “solidarity” with other sections of railway workers.

The Transnet bureaucrats are evidently hoping that rail employees have a short memory. Just five years ago, this very union really did play the role of “contract basher.” At that time, Transnet signed an auxiliary contract with DB Regio involving substantially lower pay and conditions for drivers, with up to 18 additional unpaid shifts. The contract ultimately failed because the GDL refused to sign.

For years, the negotiation of give-backs and concessions has been a matter of course for the main unions affiliated to the DGB. The industrial union IG Metall has been a role model in this respect.

At Volkswagen, the union worked hand in glove with the company's former labour director, Peter Hartz, who went on to spearhead the notorious anti-welfare laws that bear his name. Only this year the public service workers union, Verdi, agreed a contract involving the loss of 50,000 jobs at German Telekom, together with drastic wage cuts, longer hours and harsher conditions of work for those retaining their jobs.

But when train drivers revolt against the wage concessions dictated by the trade unions, the bureaucrats denounce them for a “lack of solidarity.” What hypocrisy! The workers movement owes virtually all of its gains to those who in the past fought courageously for improvements. If workers had merely accepted that which other workers already had, there would

still be child labour in Germany.

The head of Verdi, Frank Bsirske, used the national congress of his organisation to denounce the train drivers for “breaking ranks,” disrupting “solidarity” and trying to “single-handedly get as much as they could.” He made this scab attack on the train drivers just three months after Verdi sold out the Telekom workers.

The fact that Bsirske was nevertheless re-elected as chairman with the votes of 94 percent of the congress delegates shows that the entire body of bureaucrats is intent on waging war on their own members.

DB Chairman Mehdorn has the full support of Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD) in his campaign against the train drivers. The minister likes to stress his neutrality and hides behind the statement that he strictly respects bargaining autonomy.

But as the 100 percent owner of the railways, the government is a party in this conflict and Mehdorn is its employee. By behaving “neutrally” the government is, in fact, giving the DB chairman a free hand to take on the train drivers.

The main concern of both Mehdorn and the government is to float the rail system on the stock exchange as quickly as possible. This requires that the company be profitable and have firm control over its workforce. A success for the train drivers in their dispute would mean “that the sale of shares in the German rail system to private investors would be in danger,” according to the weekly *Die Zeit*. The newspaper continues: “What sort of investor readily invests in a company with three trade unions competing with each other for power and influence?”

DB management and the government also have the backing of the courts, which, in the face of a militant challenge from any section of workers, immediately respond by throwing their legal principles overboard and resorting to the sort of naked class “justice” that has played such a perfidious role in Germany’s past.

The various judgements of German labour courts, which have either partially or totally banned strikes by the train drivers, are a cause for serious concern. The right to strike in Germany is anchored in the constitutional principle of bargaining autonomy, which prohibits any state interference. This cannot simply be set aside by a court order.

A number of lawyers back this interpretation. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Thomas Dietrich, president of the Federal Labour Court from 1994 to 1999, described the ban on train drivers’ strikes issued over the summer by a labour court in Nuremberg as “grotesque.” He said, “The extent of damage done is insufficient on its own to justify prohibiting a strike.”

The same argument, i.e., the disruption and economic damage arising from a strike, was again employed by a labour court in Chemnitz to restrict the strike activities of train drivers just one week ago.

Such a judgement amounts to annulling the right to strike. If strikes are only permitted on the basis that they cause little or no economic damage, the strike weapon is deprived of any force. The sense of a strike consists in exerting pressure by causing economic damage. If the Chemnitz judgement is taken as a guideline, all militant disputes will end up before a judge, with the strikers facing the threat of imprisonment.

The train drivers union, the GDL, headed by CDU member (and former parliamentary deputy) Manfred Schell, is completely incapable of challenging a united front of the DB executive committee, the government, the courts and the DGB trade union federation. The GDL leadership has twisted and turned for weeks desperately seeking a compromise.

Earlier this week, Schell announced that the union would commence four days of strike action beginning Thursday, October 11. At the last minute, however, Schell agreed to talks with management and precipitously called off any action for Thursday.

The union has long since signalled its readiness to bring down its wage demands. It is, however, less able to back down on its demand for a

separate contract for train drivers because this would threaten its survival as an independent organization.

The docile and vacillating stance struck by the GDL only serves to embolden the DB executive in its drive to defeat the workers and smash the union.

The action taken by the GDL on October 5 resembled more a lockout than a strike. Exploiting the GDL’s desperate hopes for negotiations and compromise over the preceding weeks, the DB had ample time to draw up its plan of attack. On October 5, GDL train drivers were not even allowed onto their locomotives, and GDL members who sought to demonstrate were escorted from railway stations. Since then, the DB executive has dug in even further and categorically turned down any new offer from the union.

Train drivers can no longer leave the leadership of their dispute in the hands of GDL. They should set up their own independent committees to conduct the struggle. They should establish contact with the members of the other railway unions and mobilize them in a broad front against the strike-breaking treachery of the leadership of Transnet and other unions. The strike must be expanded to shut down the entire rail system for an unlimited period. To this end, the train drivers require the solidarity and support of the entire working class.

The defence of living standards as well as social and democratic rights requires a fundamentally new political strategy. The needs of working people must be given priority over the profit interests of big business, through the fight for a socialist programme. Production in general and important public services such as the railways must be freed from the grip of a financial aristocracy and placed at the service of society as a whole.

This can be achieved only if workers break with their old, national-based organizations and conduct a struggle for the socialist reorganization of society on a European and world-wide basis. This is the aim of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**