

Train drivers step up strike action in Germany

A WSWS reporting team
19 October 2007

The train drivers trade union (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer—GDL) has intensified its tactics in a contract dispute with the German Railways Board (Deutsche Bahn—DB). A strike that began in the early hours of Thursday led to widespread disruption of Germany's regional and suburban train network.

The railway network in the east of the country was particularly hard hit, with an estimated 80 percent of trains affected by the strike. Railway spokesmen confirmed that a large majority of regional and suburban trains also did not run in western Germany. The new tactics adopted by the union have been accompanied by a conflict inside the union leadership itself.

The new strike offensive by train drivers is linked to a change of tactics by the GDL in the conduct of the negotiations. Until this week the train drivers' dispute had been led by the chairman of the GDL, Manfred Schell. In the middle of the week it was then announced that Schell was to begin a three-week convalescence. His deputy has now assumed control of the dispute.

At a press conference in Frankfurt-Main on Wednesday the deputy chairman of the trade union, Claus Weselsky, told the press that the offer submitted by DB on Monday did not contain "the slightest substantial improvement" and had therefore been rejected.

Weselsky also announced further nationwide strike action in regional and suburban rail transport over the coming days. In addition, Weselsky declared that the GDL was appealing the provisional ruling made by the labour court in Chemnitz, which on October 5 had banned the GDL from taking strike action on the long distance train network and in goods transport. Weselsky stated that "with our appeal we hope to expand our possibilities to strike to also include goods and long distance transport."

Weselsky explained that after "intensive examination of the unabridged version" of the 250-page offer made by Deutsche Bahn it was clear that the GDL would not receive an independent contract agreement as had been proposed in a "moderation result" four weeks ago. He added, "Even worse: the Railways Board is seeking to impose new limitations on us with this contract offer. According to this offer in future we would be unable to raise demands regarding pay and working times without the authorization of the contract partners Transnet/GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwärter)."

DB Chairman Hartmut Mehdorn was obviously seeking to strip the GDL of the power to conduct its own independent contract negotiations. "There can be no doubt that this would be favourable

for the privatisation course being pursued by the DB railway executive committee," the GDL deputy told the press. He called the wage offer "absolutely derisory" and an effort by the DB executive to provoke further labour disputes.

The only addition to its previous offer was an agreement by the Railways Board to pay a lump sum of €1,400 for overtime already worked in 2007 (equivalent to 104 hours).

Claus Weselsky comes from eastern Germany, where the GDL has a higher level of organization than in the west. Before the reunification of Germany in 1990 he had worked as driver in the East on the border with Poland. In the former East Germany he was neither a member of a trade union nor a political party. Together with 95 percent of East German train drivers, he joined the GDL in 1990 and was elected the union's deputy chairman last year.

According to media reports, Weselsky has been demanding a stepping up of the union's tactics for some weeks. The convalescence holiday of GDL head Schell had evidently been preceded by an intense conflict within the leadership of the union. Many train drivers—particularly in the East—have been demanding an intensification of the dispute, which began following a 95 percent vote at the beginning of August for strike action. A series of deliberate provocations by DB head Mehdorn—who refused to conduct serious negotiations, called the entirely justified wage demands by train drivers "crazy" and sought support in Germany's courts for a strike ban—has only served to increase the militancy of many train drivers.

When DB boss Mehdorn declared last week that he regarded himself to be at "war" with the GDL, the response of many train drivers was: "If he wants war, he can have it."

Following the press conference and announcement of new strike action on Wednesday, the DB executive reacted with a new provocation. It would make no new offer, Mehdorn said. The GDL had rejected its offer and was now on a "contractual train to nowhere," according to DB personnel chief Margret Suckale in Berlin. "Any patience on our part is completely exhausted," she said.

The conflict has now gone way beyond the framework of a normal contract dispute. Mehdorn is intent on creating a precedent with the train drivers, and has the active support of the government, the judiciary, big business groups and Germany's main federation of trade unions (DGB).

The change of leadership in the dispute is a reflection of

differences within the GDL leadership, but there are already the first signs of compliance by the new strike leader. Weselsky announced that a strike planned for Friday, October 19, would be called off and that the union would only make clear over the weekend if the strike would be continued next week.

A WSWS reporting team spoke with train drivers in Berlin.

René Staub, 34, is a train driver in Berlin with 17 years service.

“We are very glad that a hard line is finally been taken and that the miserable offer of Monday has been immediately answered with a strike. That is the only language Mehdorn and his executive committee understand. If they do not make a better offer after today’s strike, we will strike tomorrow and also in the coming week. We will pull it off. That is the opinion of virtually all the colleagues here.

“To that extent I also support the change in leadership in Frankfurt, with regard to negotiations. In my view there were too many long pauses between the individual strike actions over the past weeks. I cannot say if there were differences of opinion in the GDL leadership—it could well be. I would put it this way: Manfred Schell, who has led the union nationally for many years, should recover in quiet and enjoy his convalescence. The GDL has always demanded better health care.

“It is also good that an appeal is to be made against the Chemnitz ruling, which only allows us to strike in regional and suburban networks and bans strikes in long distance and goods traffic. The ruling is an open attack on the right to strike. If a strike can be banned on the grounds that it causes economic harm, then there is no longer a right to strike. Otherwise how can one possibly put pressure on the company?”

When asked how the dispute should be carried forward, René answered: “We should copy the French. That is, an unlimited strike by train drivers in all areas for as long as it takes for Mr. Mehdorn to make a reasonable offer. The fact that train drivers and other railway workers are taking strike action in France today is a coincidence, but nevertheless makes clear that we share very similar problems everywhere. In France the strikes, as far as I know, are directed in particular against the worsening of pensions.

“One of the main problems we have here is the fact that our demands, and also the offers made by DB, are utterly distorted by the company executive committee and presented in a very distorted fashion by much of the media. For example we repeatedly hear that we have been offered a 10 percent wage increase and a single payment of 2,000 euros by the end of the year. That does not sound too bad, but it is simply a lie.

“In reality the Transnet offer was offered up again, i.e., a wage increase of 4.5 percent—I believe there is even a running time of 19 months agreed upon, and then we should also work an extra two hours paid overtime. This is then packaged as a 10 percent wage increase. We already work 41 hours per week and now they want us to work 43 hours. That is not an improvement but rather a step backwards. We already have shift plans that not only border on the unacceptable, but go beyond that. When the new rosters were tightened up in June I had real fears for my health.

“The single payment of a so-called 2,000 euros by the end of the year is also a sham. We are to get the 600 euros, which Transnet agreed to, and payment for two extra hours overtime per week

worked in 2007. One asks what happens to those who have no outstanding overtime—they are to get nothing, and secondly we are entitled to remuneration for the overtime anyway. In other words: we are not receiving anything in addition to what was already offered.”

When asked about the strike-breaking role played by Transnet and the DGB, Staub replied: “I know that many colleagues in Transnet do not agree with the cuddling up by Transnet leader Norbert Hansen with Mehdorn. Many colleagues have indicated they support our labour dispute. A large number have already resigned from Transnet and come over to us. My appeal to Transnet colleagues is very simple: Do not allow yourselves to be misused! Support our fight, we have common interests!”

Very similar questions came up in discussion with a group of striking train drivers in the main railway station in East Berlin.

Stefanie Große, 29, has worked for eight years as an S-Bahn driver (suburban rail). She stressed that the reporting of the dispute in the media had very little to do with the facts and instead repeats the propaganda of the DB executive committee. “Anyone should be able to understand that a wage increase of 4.5 percent and the payment of two hours of additional work does not amount to a 10 percent wage increase.

“It is also clear that payment for overtime already worked does not represent an improvement in income. It is just old wine being put into new bottles.”

Another participant in the discussion, Bjoern Glinka,40, has driven S-Bahn trains for 12 years in Berlin and described the difficult conditions of work and shift systems. “Although for us train drivers the issues at stake are to some extent very specific questions, with regard to shift work it is similar to what is taking place in many industries.

“One only has to look at what happened at Deutsche Telekom. Fifty thousand employees were detached from the mother company and regrouped under much worse conditions. The same thing is happening all over the place. We have decided to resist and that is why Mehdorn and the DB executive committee are not giving way. If we are victorious it would have repercussions for other sections of workers.”



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