

German train drivers' strike: GDL union leader appeals to the chancellor

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24 October 2007

Last weekend, the chairman of the German train drivers' union Deutsche Lokomotivführer (GDL), Manfred Schell, made an announcement from his convalescence holiday in Bodensee. He called upon the German government "to immediately mediate" in the train drivers' contract dispute.

"The government can no longer refrain from intervening in the conflict," Schell said. "The country cannot bear it in the long term. We need an agreement." The government is obliged to mediate, he said. Schell stressed that the time had come for both sides to make concessions, and announced the readiness of the GDL to compromise. The problem, however, was that Deutsche Bahn (DB) was "not even ready to negotiate."

It is not the first time the GDL chairman has called upon German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) to exert her influence on the railways board executive committee. In the middle of July, he made an appeal in the pages of the *Berliner Zeitung* for the chancellor to use her influence and "make sure the railways executive committee meets us for proper substantial negotiations." As the basis for his appeal, Schell declared that the chancellor was the highest representative of a government, which is "in principle the main owner of the railways."

This line of argument, however, turns reality upside down. Precisely because the German railways are still state owned, but with the executive preparing to launch the company on the stock market, the role of the government in this conflict is much less "neutral" than would normally be the course in a contract dispute.

DB boss Hartmut Mehdorn is not the chairman of the board of a private business, but an employee of a state-owned company. He was appointed by the government in order to increase profits and prepare the company for its stock market launch. He can be sacked at any time. In other words, the actions of Mehdorn and the DB executive take place with the full support and agreement of the German government.

The course of action adopted by the DB executive is discussed and coordinated in the office of Transport Undersecretary Jörg Hennerkes. Hennerkes cooperates closely with the chairman of the DGB trade union Transnet, Norbert Hansen, as well as the DB company works council boss Günter Kirchheim. All three are members of the DB supervisory board

and support the privatisation plans. They in turn keep in close contact with Transport Minister Tiefensee and, like him, are also members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

It is therefore absurd to expect any support from the government in the train drivers' dispute. One could just as well appeal to the employers' federations. The grand coalition (CDU-SPD-Christian Social Union) came to power with the express intention of implementing the privatisation of the railways together with the further implementation of Agenda 2010 of its SPD-Green predecessor government against increasing opposition. And the government is determined to carry out its agenda. It is not possible to oppose the plans of the government and plead at the same time for its assistance.

The struggle against the miserable pay and working conditions of train drivers stands in the way of the plans to privatise the railways. The German government cannot attract investors if DB uses its resources for the improvement of wages and conditions of work instead of paying out large dividends to profit-hungry shareholders. And investors will avoid any investment in a privatised railways as long as the danger exists that train drivers and other railway workers could strike again for better wages. In addition, the privatisation and the introduction of competition on the rail service is aimed at introducing cheap wage labour—as was already the case in the breaking up and privatisation of the German post office and Telekom.

It was clear from the outset that the present conflict over wages has political dimensions and demands a struggle against the government. The provocative arrogance with which DB personnel head Margret Suckale and DB Chairman Mehdorn have for weeks refused to make any serious offer, while dragging out negotiations, flows from the fact that they know they have the backing of the government. They want to force the train drivers to their knees and set an example and intimidate anyone who dares to oppose growing social polarisation and the destruction of working conditions.

When GDL head Schell now demands support from the government and signals his readiness to make concessions, then he is betraying the struggle to realise the entirely justified demands of the train drivers in favour of a lousy compromise.

Where cooperation with the government leads is shown by

the development of the DGB and, in particular, the railway trade union Transnet. The union has nothing in common with an organisation representing the interests of its members. Transnet cooperates closely with the DB executive and the government and has taken over the role of leading the propaganda campaign against the GDL.

Immediately after the strike ballot at the beginning of August, when more than 95 percent of the GDL membership voted for strike, Transnet began a signature campaign with the slogan, "Not so GDL!" Since then, Transnet and DGB functionaries have used every opportunity to split and isolate the striking train drivers.

Instead of appealing to the government, train drivers must link up with other sections of railway workers, as well as those workers who have been sacked or downgraded at Telekom, and mobilise broad social layers. Strikers should also establish links with the striking railway workers in France and striking post office workers in England.

The train drivers cannot be left isolated by the DGB trade unions and crushed by the DB, while at the same time being criminalised by the courts. Solidarity committees must be developed! The struggle by train drivers must be made the starting point for a broad offensive against wage and welfare cuts and against the grand coalition in Berlin!

Popular support for the drivers' strike remains high and so far unbroken because millions of citizens have also personally felt the effects of the growing social crisis. While profits and the incomes of the rich soar, the broad mass of society is forced to eke out a living confronting declining incomes and social security benefits.

DB boss Mehdorn, with his annual salary of €3.2 million, and his executive committee colleague Margret Suckale are representatives of a layer of parasites intent on carrying out an unceasing attack on the social rights and welfare of the remainder of society. Millions now believe that it is time to call a halt to such a process, and for this reason they welcome the struggle undertaken by the train drivers. This support must be developed and widened.

This requires a political strategy that goes beyond the limited framework of trade union, single-issue politics. In addition to the preparation of further strike measures, a political debate must be conducted over a programme that corresponds to the needs of the working population.

When it is repeatedly declared that reasonable wages and acceptable and humane conditions of work are incompatible with the profit drive of big business, then this only confirms the necessity for a social transformation based on a genuine socialist orientation.

The case of the railways makes especially clear that the interests of the population at large are incompatible with the personal enrichment of a tiny social elite. The transport network has been financed and supported by generations of ordinary taxpayers. The transport of the population is a social

need, and control of such services must be torn away from the financial aristocracy and be placed at the service of society as whole.

The opposing side is very conscious of the significance of the train drivers' strike. This is the only explanation for the fact that the labour court in Chemnitz could dare to set aside the fundamental right to strike and refuse for weeks to give a date for an appeal. The judges are evidently encouraged by the broad front of the government, the DGB and media, which backs the DB executive.

The Chemnitz judgement, which forbids any strike action in long-distance and goods traffic on the railways, is completely arbitrary and violates elementary legal principles. It harks back to the unsavoury traditions of class-law justice in Germany's past.

Just days ago, it was announced that an appeal by the union against the strike ban would only be permitted for the beginning of November. This makes the aim of the original ruling clear. Above all, it was to ensure that ordinary commuters in local and regional transport are affected by the strikes, while losses for business are minimised. The judges obviously hope that their ruling could lead to a public backlash against the strike. Many commuters have season cards, thereby reducing the financial losses for the DB management, which can hold out longer against the strikers.

A strike in goods and the long-distance transport network, on the other hand, would very quickly have grave economic and financial consequences for the economy and therefore has to be prevented by the government and courts at all costs.

But it should be recalled that legal questions are at the same time questions of power. On this basis, it is important to build support for the train drivers and make their struggle the starting point for a broad mobilisation against the German government.



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