

German train drivers' strike affects large part of rail network

PSG leaflet provokes vital discussion

Our reporters
13 October 2007

Train drivers took strike action on Friday, affecting large parts of the German regional and suburban train network. The train drivers' trade union, the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer), called the strike on Thursday shortly before a high-level conference between union representatives and the management of Deutsche Bahn (Germany Railways—DB).

The high-level conference in Berlin was convened by the head of the DB's supervisory board, Werner Müller. Müller was minister of economics in the previous German government led by Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party) and is at present chief executive of the Ruhr Coal AG.

Taking part in the discussion were the chairman of the GDL, Manfred Schell; the chairman of DB, Hartmut Mehdorn; and the head of the Transnet railway workers' union, Norbert Hansen; as well as Transport Undersecretary Jörg Hennerkes (SPD), on behalf of the German government. Müller declared that the intention of the meeting was not a continuation of the previous months of discussions, but rather a meeting aimed at arriving at "a fair solution."

After three and a half hours of discussion, Mehdorn announced, "The DB executive committee will submit a new offer on Monday," but gave no details of the offer. He also made no mention of whether the offer includes a separate contract for the GDL—one of the main demands of the union, which is also calling for a substantial increase in wages for its members.

GDL head Schell declared that if the offer on Monday were acceptable, the union would call off any further action until October 31. Due to the late announcement of the results of the conference, the union was not able to call off the strike action on Friday.

Deutsche Bahn declared its intention of taking legal action against the strike if it affected long-distance and goods traffic. One week ago, the Chemnitz Labour Court had banned the GDL from striking on long-distance routes, declaring that such action was "disproportionate."

DB also has the firm backing of the transport minister, Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD), and the trade union Transnet. Tiefensee rejected a renewed call from the GDL to mediate in the dispute.

WSWS reporters spoke on Thursday with train drivers in the city of Frankfurt/Main. They distributed leaflets containing a statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), "Support the German train drivers' struggle against Deutsche Bahn!" The leaflet called upon the entire working class to defend the train drivers and make the strike the starting point for a political offensive against the German government.

Train drivers expressed considerable interest in the statement, and a number who had taken copies returned in order to get more to distribute to their colleagues.

Transnet members among the train drivers in Frankfurt expressed their dissatisfaction with the role played by their own union. One member was considering resignation: "I am on the verge of resigning from Transnet. I have paid dues for 30 years, but I do not have the impression that Hansen and the union leadership have the interests of the members at heart."

When one train driver defended the deal accepted by Transnet for a 4.5 percent wage increase and accused the GDL of splitting the unity of railway workers, he was turned on by other train drivers, who declared his comments to be nonsensical and completely beside the

point. “In reality it is Transnet which has split workers. The deal they made isn’t even enough to compensate for inflation.”

Formerly, railway workers were organised in a single large trade union. Although the train drivers were separately organised, wage negotiations had always been conducted collectively.

Another train driver reported that he had only just learned in discussions with colleagues of the low wages paid to young train drivers. “I am a civil servant, but it is completely impossible to live and bring up a family in Frankfurt on the basis of the wages paid to young co-workers.”

The driver reported that he had received a call a week ago telling him to take the place of a regular driver following the partial strike by the GDL last Friday. “I refused, however,” he said, and made clear that he is not the only employee who was not prepared to act as a strikebreaker.

According to the newspaper *Die Welt*, Deutsche Bahn reacted to the train drivers’ strikes last Friday with verbal notices of sackings and suspensions. Thomas Schutze, tariff advisor for the GDL, told the newspaper, “We know of cases where train drivers were sacked by the DB subsidiary Regio following the strike on Friday.”

According to the GDL, three rail workers employed by the Regio Berlin Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania were verbally given notices to quit last Friday because they refused to work on the basis of the company’s emergency timetable service—i.e., as strike breakers. Another driver in the GDL is alleged to have been suspended in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

The PSG statement was also distributed in Berlin at the main stations of Alexanderplatz and Ostbahnhof. A young train driver organised in the GDL declared that the motto for Deutsche Bahn was that “one could carry out strikes, as long as they did not do anyone any harm.” When economic reasons are given as the basis for banning a strike, “one could just as well pack up and abolish the unions.” He was dissatisfied with the way in which the GDL had failed to properly inform its members over what was being planned. Some important information had only been made public by the media. For this worker, the issue of overtime was central. Many drivers were working overtime without

receiving any remuneration for the extra hours.

Tino Blossy and Melanie Kowalski, both in their early twenties, confirmed this. They were on the way to a local job centre to participate in a training scheme. Tino’s uncle is a train driver for Deutsche Bahn. “He informed me that there is a great deal of unpaid overtime and poor wages,” he said. “Despite their obligation to the workforce, the DB management refuses to pay up. My uncle had considered switching to the private rail company Inter-Connex, which pays the same low wages, but does not require its workers to work overtime.”

Most passers-by supported the demands raised by the train drivers. A young trainee working in a legal office agreed that the train drivers had a very responsible occupation. “They are perfectly entitled to strike, they have suffered cuts in the past.” She also declared her opposition to the court ban on previous strikes because they “violated the principle of autonomy in contract bargaining.”

Several passers-by also referred to the tremendous gulf between the huge sums paid to members of the railway’s executive committees and those paid to train drivers. In 2006, Mehdorn received 3.18 million euros, an increase of 100 percent compared to the year before. One woman said she could see the big luxury cars being driven by members of the DB management. For train drivers, who bore great responsibility, on the other hand, “their wages are stagnating, as are wages in general during the last 10 years.”

An elderly passer-by finally summed it up: “Mehdorn makes too much money, the others too little.”



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