

Germany: Interviews with striking train drivers

Our reporters
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The latest strikes by German train drivers held on Thursday and Friday of last week brought a large part of the German regional and suburban railway system to a halt, particularly in the east of the country. Over the weekend, the management of Deutsche Bahn (German Railways—DB) categorically ruled out any new offer to the train drivers who are demanding their own contract and a significant wage increase after years of declining incomes. Reporters from the WSWS spoke with strikers in Frankfurt am Main, Berlin and Essen.

Despite the escalation of the strike and the growing campaign by politicians and the media against the strike, most rail travellers at Frankfurt station supported the striking drivers. Often, passengers called out their support for the pickets saying “Hang in there” or “Keep it up!”

All the strikers mounting pickets, with whom WSWS spoke, were particularly indignant about the attitude of the SPD and its chairman Kurt Beck.

Train driver Uwe Hannsen deplored the fact that political strikes are forbidden in Germany, in contrast to France. The employers have certainly been making political attacks on fundamental rights. The present attack on the right to strike greatly worried him, stressed Hannsen.

“In my opinion, this strike here in Germany clearly has a political background. The employers generally - not just Deutsche Bahn - are trying to restrict and undermine our right to strike. They are creating a system of working bordering on American conditions - with hiring and firing and everything that is part of that.

“If we accept this now and pull in our tails, as it were, then the employers will have achieved what they want: the first victory against the right to strike and thus against the right to collective bargaining. This would mean the beginning of the end of a fair system of collective bargaining in Germany. At some point, that concerns everybody, not only train drivers. As soon as a trade union seeks to conduct collective bargaining for a particular group of employees and takes strike action in pursuit of its goals, it would be banned.

“Employees would then have no means of applying pressure, and thus the employers could do what they please. But it seems no one understands this yet. It happened in England under the Thatcher government with the miners. The entire trade union

structures were broken there. Now this is being attempted on the railways here. The first attempt is with us train drivers. In France, they are trying the same thing with railway workers’ pensions. And everything is done in the name of globalization and supposed fairness.

“We don’t need to say anything about Mr. Hansen from [rail union] Transnet. The man sits on the Deutsche Bahn supervisory board, and gets €1.7 million from them. That determines how he decides about things and he has sold out his own members. Thus in my eyes he is not a union representative, he is the employers’ lickspittle. It’s no wonder then that he supports the privatisation of the railways and takes the sorts of decisions he has made. That is a done deal.”

There is much solidarity between railway workers. All those rail staff with whom WSWS reporters spoke did not feel they were being properly represented by the Transnet and GDBA unions. These unions are too strongly identified with the employers. The Deutsche Lokomotivführer (German Train Drivers Union, GDL) union is seen as leading the way. However, many of those who spoke to WSWS reporters held out hopes in the government and believed it would put pressure on Deutsche Bahn CEO Mehdorn to make an improved offer.

A non-unionised train driver from Frankfurt said he supported the strikers. He did not want to give his name because the management had banned him from speaking to the media unless he was accompanied by someone from the company’s press department.

He reported that cuts in holiday and Christmas bonuses meant he was €2,500 a year worse off. He also had to work longer hours. His daughter was a train driver on the urban transit system and had to make do with much less money.

“It is important that GDL has its own collective agreement because Transnet is so strongly linked with the management. That is not an independent trade union. That’s also why the solidarity of the other railway staff is so great. They know that if the train drivers are successful now, they themselves will have far better possibilities of lodging wage claims. That is exactly what the management fear. And that’s why they are so vehement against the engine drivers.

“Also the other employees must get out of Transnet and join an independent trade union. It’s just there are only a few

alternatives at the moment.”

He thought that the government should get involved in the industrial dispute in favour of the workers, since the government was the main shareholder. However, he was critical of the privatisation plans: “The ordinary railway worker is against privatisation. We have social obligations that are not compatible with market principles.”

The railways were being misused in order to make a profit, he said. When the members of the Deutsche Bahn board awarded themselves a juicy salary increase, nobody involved in politics or the media got agitated and said that was excessive.

Another train driver from Cologne, who did not want to use his name for the same reasons, expressed his solidarity with his colleagues. He stressed that working conditions were very stressful. Then he took out his roster and showed how many shift changes it contained. Each week he has to stay overnight in a different city. Sometimes after twelve hours work and nine hours time off he has to start again on the early shift. This month, he had to work on three out of four weekends. Many engine drivers faced rosters that were even worse.

He supported the engine drivers’ strike because he believes they are playing a pioneering role. The other railway workers would feel encouraged by a successful strike. “Transnet does not represent railway workers. In particular, it does not represent the interests of driving staff with their irregular work times.” He did not expect anything good would come from an intervention by the government. “The government has its own interests as the owners of the railways.”

A forty-year old driver who was participating on the GDL picket line and has been a member of the union since 1990 thought that the most important demand was for an independent collective agreement. Train drivers simply had a completely different range of activities that were not reflected in the usual collective agreement. Each minute of their working day was exactly planned and laid down.

He was horrified by the recent court decision in Chemnitz, banning the union from conducting strikes in long distance and goods transport: “If the court order was upheld on appeal one could only talk about dictatorial measures. If the other unions didn’t resist it - and it looks like that is the case - they would no longer be any use. They would then be too strongly involved with the interests of the company.”

Many passengers also expressed their solidarity. However, most were not aware of the importance of the strike. They saw it rather as an everyday industrial dispute. Some consciously solidarized themselves with the high wage claim of the engine drivers. “At last someone is doing something about constantly sinking wages,” one passenger said.

Mr. Mueller, a retired fitter, criticized Transnet, calling the union the “favourite child” of Deutsche Bahn CEO Mehdorn. “Workers should not join this union,” he said. For Mueller, the Chemnitz court order meant the end of the independence of the courts. He also expressed his hope that the strikes meant that

the privatisation of the railways could be delayed. “Privatisation never did any good. Not when they privatised water, gas or anything else.” He did not understand why management was getting agitated about the 30-percent pay claim. A young engine driver would have to think very hard today about whether he could afford to have a family.

An unemployed teacher came up to the picket line in order to wish the strikers well, despite her train being delayed for two-hours. “The situation is the same in every workplace. It’s good that finally someone is standing up.”

When WSWs reporters began to distribute a statement at a picket line near the entrance hall of Berlin’s Ostbahnhof, calling for support for the strike, railway security staff immediately came over and demanded they leave. Although the picketing train drivers insisted on their right to free speech, the security guards insisted that non-travellers would have to leave the building. Finally, two drivers came outside the station in order to continue the discussion.

One of them produced his duty roster showing a 55-hour working week, explaining he often had to work additional extra shifts because of construction work on the lines or to cover sick absences. The staffing level is very low and people are always missing, he said. “If colleagues are ill, then others must work more “, he said and provided examples of the ruthless physical and financial exploitation of the drivers.

He spoke with enthusiasm about a novel he was reading; *L’argent (Money)* by Emile Zola. This book was very contemporary, he said. “It describes who the stock exchange benefits, the greed, acting with money that did not exist at all.” He said that the shares in the privatised Deutsche Telekom were the best example from the present.

His younger colleague expressed concern over the further course of the dispute. “I fear that it will come to conditions like those in Britain in 1982 when Thatcher moved against striking workers, when the trade unions were smashed up. What is the significance of this court decision in Chemnitz? It points in this direction.”



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