

German court to decide on right to strike:

“If the right to strike is being trampled underfoot then I expect support”

Interview with two striking train drivers

Our reporter
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The labour court in the East German city of Chemnitz is due to rule November 2 on the right of German train drivers to conduct strike action. The train drivers' union GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer) has lodged an appeal against an earlier ruling restricting its right to strike.

Should the court rule in favour of the GDL, the union has promised to begin immediate strike action over the weekend aimed at affecting the entire railway network operated by the German Railways Board (DB).

In its earlier judgement, the same court ruled in favour of the DB and banned the GDL from conducting strike action in the long-distance and goods rail network. The court ruled that the any such strike action would be “disproportionate.” This meant that any strike action by the train drivers was restricted to regional and suburban rail travel.

The effect of the initial ruling was to minimise the impact of the ongoing strike action by train drivers for German business concerns and industry, while maximising the effect on ordinary passengers. The Chemnitz judgement was a deliberate attack on the fundamental right to strike, aimed at creating conditions for a public backlash against the train drivers. The ruling has been hailed by DB management and the German political establishment.

During the course of strike action at the end of last week, WSWs reporters spoke about the dispute and the court ruling banning strike action with two drivers, Ayhan Demir and Thomas Kersten, at the main railway station in Essen, in Germany's Ruhr area.

WSWS: The chairman of the Social Democratic Party

(SPD), Kurt Beck, recently declared that the GDL only represents a “small percentage of rail staff” and also only a “small section of train drivers.” He said this minority was trying to break away from the “community of railway employees.” What is your opinion about this statement?

Ayhan D.: On the one hand, everybody is shouting about the autonomy of collective bargaining if we call upon the owners—the federal government—to arbitrate in this conflict. But Mr. Beck is then of the opinion that he can trample over this autonomy as SPD chairman by making such stupid comments. It is not the case that we want to break any solidarity.

The other railway staff are organised in different unions. They have a collective wage agreement, and if these colleagues say to their own organisations, in which they are members, “That's not enough for us, you have to get more out,” then we don't have any influence on this. It is also not true that we represent a minority of train drivers—some 85 percent of train drivers are currently organised with us. And Beck should get his facts straight before he opens his mouth. He should stick to what he knows, making speeches. Otherwise he should keep out.

Thomas K.: One must be clear: The GDL is called a minority, but is logically not a minority since we represent 85 percent of unionised train drivers. And what other union can say that it represents 85 percent of an occupational group? I believe that's a thorn in the eye of the unions.

WSWS: Have you appealed for support from the general population—for example, in your flyers?

Ayhan D: The problem is that the issue has become very complex. It is not easily explained to passengers on a single sheet of paper. Unfortunately, we cannot muster the machinery that the employer has at its disposal. Today, we have again seen the [management's] half-page adverts in all the daily papers. In other words, using the money that we earn, they are working against us and tell the public that the railway is offering us 10 percent and €2,000—which is a lie, of course. But this machinery is not at our disposal, unfortunately.

WSWS: A television report called Transnet “Mehdorn’s tame union.” Another union leader who attacks the drivers’ strike and denounced them for “breaking solidarity” is Verdi boss Frank Bsirske. What do you think of his statements?

Ayhan D: The report shows our current situation very clearly, that it’s not only a labour dispute against the employer, but also against the trade union Transnet. One only needs to look at who in 1994 supported the privatisation of the railways and its present flotation on the stock exchange. That is Transnet. Everyone can see that, that is a fact.

To Bsirske I must say—and not only to him, but also to DGB boss Sommer, who was also very negative. If the right to strike is being trampled underfoot by the courts, then I expect from every trade union, regardless of what they think of our industrial dispute, whether they regard it as divisive or not, that they stand up and say with one voice: “This must not happen in Germany!” If they are able to do this, then they are digging their own grave. It affects us today, it will affect them tomorrow.

Thomas K.: I also saw the report. It is Transnet that has got us where we are today. We would not be here today [on the picket line], we would all be in our locomotives. They are responsible for everything.

WSWS: It is not the first time that GDL Chairman Schell has called on Chancellor Angela Merkel to exert influence on the Deutsche Bahn board. Do you believe this is the correct way to proceed?

Ayhan D.: We shouldn’t forget that the German government is still the owner of this enterprise, and as the owner, has to take responsibility and act fairly. The government cannot sit back and say, “I don’t have anything to do with the railways, I have Mehdorn sitting there.” Mehdorn is a government employee. And

naturally, the federal government must exert its influence.

The government is avoiding its responsibility, as Mehdorn has been organising the privatisation. The railways are a transport enterprise in which there is an enormous public interest. And one cannot say we are promoting privatisation in order to earn billions, only then to put this in the pockets of just a few people, and leave those who do the work outside. In the past, politics has completely failed. Privatisation—let alone a stock market flotation—is absolutely wrong.

The railways have a public responsibility. We cannot say that we want people to be mobile, to travel hundreds of kilometres to their workplace, and on the other hand we close down whole stretches of track because they are not profitable. If this government thinks that creating competition on the railways is the right course, we saw in England where that led. Safety standards fell, there are constant accidents, and it is substantially more expensive afterwards than a state-owned railway.



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