

An open letter to striking train drivers from the Socialist Equality Party of Germany

Ulrich Rippert
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The following open letter was addressed to striking German train drivers on November, 28 2007.

Dear colleagues, as chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), I appeal to you not to give in at this critical juncture!

Your current contract dispute has developed into a power-struggle and has reached a critical point. The arrogant and uncompromising stance of the head of German Railways (Deutsche Bahn-DB) Hartmut Mehdorn and his chief personnel officer Margret Suckale has the backing of the German government, big business federations, the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) and the European Union establishment. They are all working together and are intent on setting an example. Those who dare to take action against the relentless wage-cutting and attacks on social programs are to be isolated, intimidated and forced to their knees.

Following the sell-out of the strike movement in France, these forces now feel they are powerful enough to break the German train drivers' strike.

The GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer—train drivers' union) executive and the contract commission have agreed to talks with the DB executive, although railway management still rejects the central demand of the GDL for a separate contract and has made no serious new offer. This shows that the GDL leadership is incapable of withstanding the considerable pressure being directed against it and has begun to capitulate. It is seeking to avoid a struggle and preparing to accept a rotten compromise.

If this is allowed to take place it would have devastating consequences for the train drivers, their families and all workers.

Therefore all those GDL members who voted for strike action this summer with a 96 percent majority must seize the initiative and put an end to the manoeuvres of the GDL leadership. Protest letters directed at the railways management and the contract commission are completely inadequate. It is necessary to expand the struggle beyond the narrowly defined parameters laid down by the trade unions

and begin a broad political offensive.

To this end it is necessary to develop action committees, which consciously seek the cooperation of all other railway employees, as well as workers or employees from other spheres of industry or public service. Such action committees should take up the tradition of the workers' councils that played such an important role in the first decades of the last century. These action committees must become the focal point for further developing and concretising the support and solidarity that already exists within broad layers of the population.

On this basis it is necessary to extend the current action into an unlimited strike by train drivers, which is then expanded to include all railway workers. The threat by officials of the German Civil Service Federation (Beamtenbund—DBB) to seize the strike fund of the GDL and seek to blackmail train drivers back to work must be rejected.

The Socialist Equality Party will do all it can to support such a struggle. As an international party we will establish links to workers in France and other countries, in which many workers and their families confront the same problems and have carried out similar struggles. The ruling elite and national governments coordinate their offensive against the working class with the assistance of the European Union bureaucracy in Brussels, while the trade unions seek to limit and isolate any militant action, playing off one layer of workers against the other until finally strangling every strike movement. Now is the time to challenge and put an end to such a strategy!

In order to lead the train drivers strike out of a looming dead end and prevent a sell-out it is necessary to make a courageous step forward. An unlimited strike, supported by action and solidarity committees can, and must, become the starting point for a broad political mobilization against the railways executive, the government and the EU bureaucracy.

All those who regard such a development as too difficult should contemplate the alternative. The agreement to negotiations without any serious offer by management was

the first step towards capitulation by the GDL leadership. Whoever now hesitates and hopes that an eventual unfavourable offer by management can then be rejected through a vote of the strikers is deceiving him- or herself.

The old adage says strike while the iron is hot! A sell-out of the strike through acceptance of a wage increase of a few percent would be seen by the DB executive and many other employers as a signal for a renewed and even sharper offensive against wages and working conditions. This would in turn lead to new disputes and conflicts, but under much more unfavourable conditions for workers.

In other words: it is necessary to oppose any climb-down by the GDL leadership and organize an unlimited strike.

DB boss Mehdorn and the economic and political elite that backs him have turned their campaign against entirely justified demands for reasonable wages and working conditions into a matter of principle. Their repeated rejection of the demand for an independent contract is aimed entirely at enforcing low wages and welfare cuts in collaboration with the yellow trade unions Transnet and GDBA. They have deliberately politicised the dispute and are determined to impose their own priorities, based on the maximisation of profits and personal enrichment, on the entire population.

The principles of free-market competition are to be established in every sphere of social life. A functioning and modern transport system established with taxpayers' money over many decades is to be denationalised and transformed into a global logistics company with the sole aim of enriching its shareholders. A company executive board comprised of eight members, which increased its own income by 70 percent in just one year to take home a combined annual salary of 20 million euros, now claims there is no money to finance decent wages and working conditions for ordinary rail employees.

It is not possible to oppose this right-wing offensive on the basis of the German tradition of social partnership—the close collaboration between the trade unions and management. This is behind the repeated retreats by the GDL leadership. The latter is searching for an acceptable compromise, under conditions where such a compromise does not exist and, in the process, it is preparing a defeat.

The reorganization of the strike from the grassroots through the building of action committees must therefore be bound up with a fundamentally new strategy and perspective. It is necessary to adopt a socialist orientation, which places the needs of the working population at the heart of social development instead of the profit interests of business and the banks. The most important spheres of production and such critical services as the railways must be removed from the control of the financial aristocracy and placed at the service of society as whole.

Only on the basis of such a program it is possible to establish close relations with all other workers and develop a strategy that unites workers across national borders in a common struggle against the combined forces of the big companies, the government, the DGB and the European Union.

This must also be the basis for opposition to all attempts to remove the train drivers from Deutsche Bahn and organise them in their own separate company. An independent contract established through such a manoeuvre—as is favoured by some GDL functionaries—would represent no improvement, quite the opposite. Irrespective of any minor wage concessions, such an arrangement would only serve to increase divisions among the railways personnel and play into the hands of those pushing for privatisation and further sharp attacks on all rail workers.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party that has defended the current strike of the train drivers against attacks from all sides while seeking to mobilize popular support.

What is now called for is an important and courageous initiative by members of the GDL to prevent the threatened sell-out and reorganize the strike on a democratic basis. Not only would such an initiative have a great effect on other rail employees, it would be enthusiastically welcomed by the entire working class in Germany and workers throughout Europe.

We call upon all our readers to distribute this letter and take up a serious discussion with their colleagues. Establish contact with the Socialist Equality Party and the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

It is now necessary to open a new chapter in the struggle against wage and welfare cuts.

In solidarity,

Ulrich Rippert

Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (PSG)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact