

All workers must mobilize behind German train drivers' strike

The German Socialist Equality Party
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Striking train drivers in Germany face a united front consisting of the German Railway (Deutsche Bahn) executive, German business federations, the grand coalition government, the media and the unions affiliated to the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB). They are all determined to force the strikers to capitulate and, if necessary, to crush the train drivers union—the GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer).

It is urgent that working people give all possible support to the strike because it raises issues that affect the future for millions of workers and their families. The strikers' completely justified demand for a reasonable income and their refusal to accept the loss of purchasing power and deteriorating working conditions have developed into a matter of principle that implicitly raises the need for a struggle for working class political power.

The head of Deutsche Bahn (DB), Hartmut Mehdorn, backed by the corporate and political elite, is determined to use all necessary means to impose social policies aimed at maximizing corporate profits and increasing the vast wealth of the financial aristocracy at the expense of the general population. For such layers, it is quite normal that the eight members of the DB board earn a combined annual salary of 20 million euros and have drastically increased their own pensions, while the real wages have been lowered and the working load increased for rail workers, leaving increasing numbers of workers and their families in need.

Their intention is to open up every aspect of social life to the unrestrained operations of the capitalist “free market.” A modern transport service developed over many decades on the basis of the taxes paid by the public is to be denationalized and transformed into a globalized company so as to enrich a small number of shareholders. Thousands of kilometres of unprofitable rail lines are to be scrapped, regardless the consequences for millions of people, especially those living in remote regions.

The same issues confront the health system, the power industry and many other service industries in Germany. The European Union bureaucracy in Brussels has already commenced the privatisation of the European road system. Motorway taxes, which have recently been introduced, are not only aimed at penalising heavy goods traffic. There are already plans for selling off or leasing stretches of motorway to private finance syndicates, which will then be able to impose duties on all sorts of vehicles, including private transport.

Support for the train drivers must become the starting point for a broad political mobilization directed against this orgy of enrichment. To this end, it is necessary to draw some important lessons from the development of the strike.

Strike-breaking role of Transnet and the DGB

From the first, the train drivers strike was opposed by the biggest railway union, Transnet, which negotiated its contract in alliance with another railway union, the GDBA. Transnet functions as a yellow union in an utterly shameless manner, and openly calls upon its members to scab. It has the complete support of the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, who is a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and the leadership of the main trade unions affiliated with the DGB.

The head of Transnet, Norbert Hansen, has used every opportunity to agitate against the train drivers strike. At a special meeting last Thursday of the supervisory board of Deutsche Bahn, of which he is a member, Hansen supported a resolution along with other “workers’ delegates” calling on the company executive to remain unyielding “even if the GDL continues to strike.”

Hansen’s main reproach against the GDL is that the union is fighting for special rights for a minority and, in so doing, violating “solidarity” with the other rail unions. For Hansen, “solidarity” means direct collaboration with the DB executive, which pays Hansen an attractive salary as deputy chairman of the supervisory board. The Transnet leader is a vehement supporter of rail privatisation and speaks openly on behalf of the profit interests of big business.

The GDL has also been criticised for breaching “contract unity.” In the past, unified contracts served to ensure that weaker layers of workers could benefit from the contracts awarded to stronger, better organised sections of workers. However, the unions have accepted a succession of wage and welfare cuts, and contract unity has become a mechanism for imposing deals on broad sections of workers resulting in drastically lower wages and increased work burdens.

While Hansen and other DGB functionaries elevate the “principle of the unified trade union” and “uniform contract agreements” in their campaign against the GDL, they are quite prepared to split workforces when it suits them. In the case of Deutsche Telekom, the service union Verdi and its work councils agreed to the siphoning off of 50,000 employees into a low-wage in-house subsidiary, and signed contracts and labour agreements which involved wage cuts of nine percent, together with four extra hours of work per week.

One could cite many other examples. Millions of workers are seeing their union officials and work councils negotiate worsened working conditions and wages and impose deals against the interests of the workforce.

This transformation of trade unions from organizations which sought a gradual improvement in conditions for workers into open

partners of management, supporting social cuts and the downgrading of working conditions in order to increase profit margins is not limited to Transnet and the DGB. It is an international phenomenon linked to the globalization of capitalist production.

As long as economic activity took place primarily within the confines of the nation state, it was possible for developed countries such as Germany to pay reasonable wages and provide good professional training, paid vacations, medical benefits and above-average wages in many companies as a means of ensuring product quality. The globalization of production and the increasing supremacy of international finance capital have long since stripped away the basis for any such policy based on relative class compromise.

Under conditions where the unions unconditionally recognize and accept the framework of capitalist production and ownership relations, and through their close connection to the SPD are closely involved in government, they move ever more rapidly to the right. They regard themselves first and foremost as factors for social stability, and are actively hostile to any independent movement of the working class.

The role of the GDL

The train drivers' own union has been affected by a large infusion of drivers from eastern Germany following the reunification of Germany. Two years ago, drivers insisted that the GDL quit its contract alliance with Transnet and the GDBA and oppose management attempts to impose wage cuts. This militancy reflects an increasing radicalisation of workers, particularly in the east of the country where the country's social decline has been most pronounced.

But, in fact, the GDL is a conservative profession-based union, which has been led for many years by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Manfred Schell. Schell has made much of the fact that he was the only CDU deputy in the Bundestag (parliament) to vote against the privatisation of the railways, but he has for weeks sought to arrive at an "acceptable compromise" with the railway executive and has repeatedly indicated his readiness to accept a wage deal lower than that demanded by his members.

He was completely unprepared for the offensive conducted against his union by the broad front of the DB executive, government, media and DGB. His recent appeals to the German chancellor make clear that he has no interest in conducting a struggle against those responsible for the unceasing campaign against social and welfare rights.

Instead, he tries to reduce the dispute to the demand for an "independent contract agreement," under conditions where this demand could lead to a clear worsening of conditions for train drivers. Some days ago, a proposal was launched in the media that the train drivers be separated off from Deutsche Bahn and form their own company, which could then be awarded its own contract. The result of such a deal would be a fragmentation of the workforce and renewed attempts to play off one section of workers against the others.

Train drivers must reject such a solution and not allow the leadership of the dispute to remain in the hands of Schell and company in the GDL. They should create their own committees and take up the leadership of the strike. They should establish contact with the members of the other rail unions and mobilize them against the strike-breaking activities of Transnet. The strike must be expanded to

include all railway workers for an unlimited period.

Internationalism

It is necessary to adopt an international orientation and a socialist perspective. It may appear to many as mere coincidence that German train drivers are taking strike action at the same time as their French colleagues are on strike. But while the trade unions seek to restrict the contract struggle to a strictly national framework and aim at cooperation with their respective governments, the fact is that workers on both sides of the Rhine confront the same problems.

For its part, the European ruling class has collaborated across national borders to coordinate its offensive against workers. This is the purpose of the European Union bureaucracy in Brussels, which has set up the mechanisms for imposing unrestricted "free market" profiteering and the unrestrained enrichment of a privileged minority in all countries.

The working class must oppose this policy with its own international strategy and actively seek the cooperation of workers in other countries. This, in turn, requires a conscious political break with the old, national organizations and their reactionary policy of collaboration with management.

The defence of incomes as well as social and democratic rights requires a fundamentally new political strategy. In place of the profit interests of big business and finance capital, it is necessary to advance an alternative which places the needs of the working population at the heart of social development, on the basis of a socialist perspective. Production and vital services such as the railways must be removed from the control of a financial elite and placed at the service of society as whole.

A few weeks ago, the chairman of DB referred to the current dispute as a war, in order to justify his unyielding opposition to the train drivers. He then set about establishing a power cartel embracing both the government and the DGB. Now the working class must take up its own independent stance and take up the gauntlet thrown down by Mehdorn. It must unreservedly support the train drivers and take up the struggle for the socialist reorganization of society.

Such a perspective requires the building of an international socialist party. This is the aim pursued by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. We call upon all our readers to distribute the articles and statements posted on the WSWS, contact the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to join and help build our movement in Germany, Europe and internationally.



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