

German train drivers intensify their strike

Our reporters

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Early Thursday morning, German train drivers expanded their strike action to include the country's regional and, for the first time, long distance rail network. The current strike, which has broadly impacted travel across Germany, is planned to last until Saturday morning. The work stoppage is the biggest strike in the history of the German rail system (Deutsche Bahn).

The strike has hit the east of the country particularly hard. In that region, many more train drivers are organized in the Deutsche Lokomotivführer (GDL) union. According to a spokesman for Deutsche Bahn in Berlin: "Only about 15 percent of regional trains were operative in the states of former East Germany."

Some 50 percent of regional trains were operative in the west of the country, but this was largely due to an emergency schedule implemented by the DB management.

The responsibility for the intensification of the dispute lies squarely with the executive committee of Deutsche Bahn, which has repeatedly refused to make a new offer, insisting that train drivers accept a deal already agreed to by the rail unions Transnet and GDBA. This sellout involves a wage increase of just 4.5 percent, plus a single payment of 600 euros.

Such an agreement for the train drivers would mean a net decline in real wages, since their wages have stagnated for years and actually dropped by 10 percent over the past two years. At the same time, the drivers' workload has risen enormously.

The GDL's demand for a starting salary of 2,500 euros gross, rising over a long period to 3,000 euros, together with a reduction in the work week from 41 to 40 hours, is entirely justified. The claim that such an increase exceeds the budget of the railways is false.

According to its own figures, meeting the wage demand of the GDL would cost DB an extra 250 million euros. This is exactly one tenth of the surplus of

2.5 billion euros which the company notched up last year at the expense of its workforce.

That a lack of money is not the issue is also apparent when one examines the salaries of DB management. Last year, management salaries rose by a total of 70 percent, pensions for the acting and former executive board members rose by 15.3 percent, and the combined incomes of all supervisory board members rose by 269 percent. (Source: End-of-year report on the situation of Deutsche Bahn AG, 2006).

Last year, the chairman of DB, Hartmut Mehdorn, awarded himself a 100 percent pay raise to 3.18 million euros, while his head of personnel, Margret Suckale, received 2.1 million euros.

The repeated claim that the strike represents an attempt to blackmail the railway executive committee turns reality on its head. It is Mehdorn and his executive committee who are doing everything they can to break the train drivers. They want to set an example and intimidate anyone who offers resistance to continuous wage cuts and the constant degradation of working conditions.

Mehdorn is prepared to invest much more money in breaking the strike than it would cost to meet the demands of the train drivers. At the same time as train drivers extended their strike, DB management put expensive full-page announcements in several daily papers. Under the heading "Stop This Insanity, Mr. Schell!" the GDL was accused of refusing to take part in negotiations "for months." Mehdorn's demagogic appeal ended with the words: "Give up at last your efforts to strike an entire country."

The supervisory board of Deutsche Bahn has resolutely closed ranks with the company executive and issued the following statement: "With regard to the strike, the supervisory board supports the position of the executive committee to refuse to accede to the demands of the German train drivers trade union for a

dissolution of the contract process, even if they continue with their strike.”

A leading figure in the company’s press department, Volker Knauer, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that there had been no formal vote on the statement, but it represented a “unanimous standpoint.”

Under German industrial law, half of the seats on such supervisory boards are occupied by representatives of the work force and trade unions—meaning the workers’ delegates on the board had given their full support to the resolution.

A special meeting of the supervisory board had been called by the chairman of the rail union Transnet, Norbert Hansen, and his counterpart at the rail union GDBA, Klaus Dieter Hommel, both of whom are supervisory board members. The meeting was called to receive a briefing from representatives of the government on a proposal for the privatisation of the railways.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Transnet boss Hansen viciously attacked the striking train drivers. It was “completely unacceptable that all of Germany” was “being forced to suffer” because the functionaries of a small union were seeking to promote themselves, he said. For the GDL, according to Hansen, the issue was merely to establish “an enhanced status.” The strike was leading to “lasting damage to Germany as an industrial site” and had to be ended as soon as possible.

The German government also demanded a “rapid end to the dispute.” Government spokesman Thomas Steg said Wednesday that the rail strike was causing considerable economic damage and was a “burden to positive economic development.” He added that it would have even more severe consequences if it continued.

The economic speakers in parliament of the Social Democratic Party and of the combined faction of the conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union, Rainer Wend and Laurenz Meyer, warned the train drivers against conducting a “struggle for sectional interests.” Wend called on the strikers to give up their struggle “for special rights at the expense of all working people.”

Indirectly, the SPD delegate admitted that it was above all necessary to prevent the strike from sending a signal to other sections of workers. The action being

taken by the train drivers today could be repeated tomorrow by the maintenance engineers and service personnel in the stations, Wend stressed.

In view of the increasing pressure from all sides, it is vital to support the striking train drivers. Members of the German Socialist Equality Party distributed leaflets which declared:

“The Socialist Equality Party calls upon the entire working population to close ranks with the train drivers. Do not permit the German Union Federation-affiliated unions to isolate the train drivers, who are being put under enormous pressure by DB management and persecuted in the courts.

“Establish solidarity committees and make the struggle of the train drivers the starting point for a broad offensive against wage and welfare cuts, and against the grand coalition government of the Social Democratic Party, Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union!”



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