

Germany: Left Party opposes train drivers' strike

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After blowing hot and cold, and adopting contradictory positions, the Left Party has finally come out unambiguously against the strike by German train drivers and taken the side of the house union Transnet, railway management and the government.

In an interview with broadcaster *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, Left Party leader Gregor Gysi said he rejects the central demand of the drivers' union GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer) for a separate contract. Although the "high wage demands of the train drivers" were quite justified, Gysi said, "What I do not find correct, is that they want to have their own collective agreement." He believes in "one business, one collective agreement."

Saying yes to a significant wage increase but no to a separate collective agreement is absurd. If the GDL had not withdrawn from the collective agreement with Transnet there would not have been a demand for a 31 percent wage increase for train drivers. The loss of income that drivers and all other rail staff have faced in recent years was agreed by Transnet and the GDBA staff association. Withdrawal from the collective agreement and the demand for a separate contract was the basis on which to fight this loss of income and to achieve a real wage increase.

Gysi's demand for union accord would be justified only if Transnet were a democratic organization that follows the will of its members. This is not the case. Transnet is in the pocket of the management of Deutsche Bahn (German Railways). Many Transnet functionaries are financed directly and indirectly by Deutsche Bahn. This dependence is purposefully kept hidden from its members. Transnet leader Norbert Hansen is not even willing to reveal to his members the salary he draws as chair of the Deutsche Bahn supervisory board.

Transnet members do not have the slightest influence over the policy of the trade union, as is shown by the fact that although a majority are against privatisation of the railways and have expressed this in numerous resolutions, this has not prevented Hansen and the union leadership from standing alongside the management in pushing forward with

privatisation. Under these conditions, Gysi's rejection of a separate GDL contract and his demand for a single collective agreement mean nothing other than the subordination of the GDL to the dictates of Transnet.

The Left Party is siding with the strike-breakers in the Transnet leadership and repeating the arguments of the German Union Federation (DGB), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Deutsche Bahn management and the government. They all reject the engine drivers having their own agreement because they want to prevent any independent struggle by workers outside the control of the DGB bureaucracy. This is dressed up with a lot of abstract twaddle about the "unity of the workforce" and "company solidarity." As well as Gregor Gysi, the president of the employers' federation, Martin Kannegiesser, is also a vehement defender of single collective agreements and trade union unity.

However, if workers only have the right to join a union that is financed by the bosses and is beholden to the government via the SPD, then the fundamental democratic right to free union membership and activity ("For everyone and for all occupations": German Constitution article 9) is no longer assured. Then conditions are more akin to those in the former East Germany, where political and union membership was limited to belonging to the state party and union, which served to suppress any independent movement of the working class.

The Left Party's attack on the strikers' central demand confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party of Germany has written about the character of this party. The unification of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in eastern Germany with a wing of the trade union bureaucracy in the west, which had organized itself into the Election Alternative (WASG), was an alliance of kindred social forces.

Born out of the former state party of East Germany, the PDS talks a lot about democracy and socialism. But it sees its main task in stabilizing existing social conditions and in keeping in check any movement from below. For similar

reasons, the trade unions regard themselves as a factor for order and, faced with the rightward turn of the SPD, fear losing their influence in the workplace.

It is no coincidence that the executive committee of the Left Party contains many union officials. A large DGB delegation was present at the party's founding conference earlier this summer, including Transnet leader Norbert Hansen. One only has to cast a glance at the politics of the Berlin state legislature—where the Left Party/PDS has been in a coalition with the SPD for over six years and has pushed through harsh social attacks—to see the true character of this party.

The fact that in the first large-scale strike since this party was formed it has placed itself on the side of the DGB, SPD and government is no surprise, but expresses the very nature of the Left Party.

Gysi's attacks on the striking train drivers show the direction in which the party is headed. This is reinforced by statements from other top Left Party officials. In a letter to the party's parliamentary faction, the deputy leader of the parliamentary group, Bodo Ramelow, explains why he rejects the strikers' aims for an "independent collective agreement separate from all other railway employees."

Ramelow writes that the GDL is "abusing" the drivers' willingness to fight, to force "independence as the main strike aim." He says this is "unacceptable." The struggle being conducted by the GDL means "the end of an industry-wide collective agreement" for the railways and must therefore be rejected. To abandon "industry-wide collective agreements and union unity" is in principle wrong, he claims.

Bodo Ramelow is a typical representative of the union bureaucrats to be found in the Left Party. His career began in the HBV, the union for commerce, banking and insurance, and one of the forerunners of the union Verdi. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, he went to East Germany, where he became HBV regional chairman in Thuringia and then rose within the ranks of the PDS.

Another member of the executive of the Left Party has also expressed her opposition to the demand of the drivers for their own collective agreement. Deputy federal chair Ulrike Zerhau penned "ten theses" in which she accuses the GDL of representing the "elite aspirations" of its members. Their struggle is dividing railway staff, she argues, and thereby plays into the hands of those sections of employers who, for quite some time, have been seeking to increase the rivalry between workers.

Clearly this full-time Verdi functionary, who earns a healthy salary as a union official, has lost all touch with reality. How else can one explain that the pay demand of the engine drivers—who must otherwise be content with wages

of around the €1,500 a month—is an "elite aspiration"?

Point 9 of her paper reads: "The GDL industrial dispute, irrespective of any success it might have, will change the culture among the railway unions ... industrial disputes that are pursued by individual groups in an enterprise, leave behind mutual recriminations, bitterness and anger." This "opens up fissures in the employees' camp" and helps companies intensify their attacks. She thus makes the engine drivers responsible for the witch-hunt by Transnet leader Hansen and Co.

In her last thesis, Zerhau comes to the conclusion that the GDL's struggle will "alter the balance of power in future disputes" to the detriment of the employees' camp. She justifies this with the following words: "If the GDL achieves its goal, other groups of employees will see this as a positive signal for their own action. Perhaps others will very soon discover that a unilateral negotiating position is better and act accordingly."

Zerhau, Ramelow and Gysi are playing a cynical game with the understandable desire on the part of workers for unity and solidarity. They are appealing to fears that individual professions and groups can be played off one against the other should there be a breakdown of the existing contract agreements.

However, it is not possible to overcome this danger by forcing train drivers into the straitjacket of the Transnet union. Unity is first and foremost a political, and not an organisational question. The policy of Transnet, which imposes the interests of management against its own members, only serves to weaken and split the workforce.

For its part the GDL has no alternative to offer. Its current talks with the DB executive include the proposal for the outsourcing of train drivers into a separate holding. Irrespective of any wage increase made, this option would only have negative consequences for all rail workers.

Unity and solidarity can only be achieved on the basis of a political perspective that puts the needs and interests of the broad layers of the population above the profit drive of big business and the banks.



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