

# The Left Party and the German train drivers strike—an exchange of letters

1 December 2007

*We are publishing below a letter sent by a member of the student organization affiliated to the Left Party in response to the article “Left Party opposes train drivers’ strike.” A reply follows by the article’s author, Ulrich Rippert.*

Dear WSWs team,

I thought your article on the Left Party and the strike by the rail workers was very good. Your arguments largely reflect my own, but what you say about the leadership of the Left Party does not apply to the party as a whole. There are certainly those within the party who support the action of the train drivers, many local groups have expressed their solidarity with the train drivers in front of stations.

Besides, it must be stressed that the student group close to the Left Party has openly sided with the strikers. It is not the GDL that is guilty of splitting tactics, but rather the leadership of the major unions that has severed any relationship with its members and has allowed itself to be corrupted by the Railways executive and the government. In this respect the GDL stands out as avant-garde, defending factory co-partnership [the German system of collaboration between the trade unions and management] and has already notched up considerable successes: over 200 tram and subway drivers in Munich recently switched from the trade union Verdi to the GDL.

There remains the hope that the GDL will be able to draw in the rest of the working class with their militant action and confidently draw into the fight the union rearguard of the railways—Transnet and the GDBA.

Socialist greetings,

Daniel

SDS Regensburg

Dear Daniel,

Thank you for your comments on the article “Left Party oppose train drivers’ strike.” I am pleased we are

in agreement on the issue of rejecting the attacks made against strikers by Gregor Gysi and other leading figures in the Left Party. But there are two statements in your letter with which I do not agree.

You write: “What you say about the leadership of the Left Party does not apply to the party as a whole.”

The truth is, however, that it is necessary to draw conclusions about the party as a whole, because it is the leadership and not ordinary members that determine the course of the party.

Whoever joins a political party also has to assume responsibility for its policies and their consequences. It is not permissible to respond by saying that the individual member has a different personal opinion.

In the case of the Left Party in particular there is a huge gulf between its propaganda and its politics in practice. It declares it is opposed to the punitive anti-welfare Hartz IV laws—and at the same time imposes them mercilessly in those states where it heads the Ministry of Labour, as was the case up until recently in Schwerin. It is opposed to the destruction of jobs in public service, while at the same time it supports the cuts implemented by the Berlin Senate. This list could be expanded. There is a stark contrast between the left-wing phrases employed by the Left Party and echoed by its membership and the right-right policies pursued by Left Party officials who hold political office.

In fact, there is a definite strategy behind this division of labour. It is a result of the perspective and function of the Left Party. It has categorically expressed its allegiance to the free-market economy and the defence of bourgeois property relations. Its left-wing rhetoric is not aimed at giving a socialist orientation to increasing social opposition. Instead it aims to head off such opposition and prevent it from becoming a threat to the existing order. The Left Party—like the Social Democratic Party—is a party pledged to the maintenance

of the status quo. Under conditions where the SPD has undergone a sharp decline, the Left Party now seeks to take over its role in precisely this respect.

Gysi's attack on the striking train drivers—backed by his parliamentary deputy Bodo Ramelow and the deputy party chairman Ulrike Zerhau—is therefore no coincidence. The rebellion by train drivers against the wage contracts dictated by the Railways and the rail unions such as Transnet threatens to bust up the entire system of German co-management. The continuing high levels of popular support for the train drivers have led to increasing concern in the headquarters of Germany's political parties and trade unions.

Gysi has a fine sense for such developments. After all, the Left Party emerged from the merger of two major bureaucratic apparatuses, which both have decades of experience in oppressing the working class—the former Stalinist state party in the east of the country and the social-democratic trade union bureaucracy in the west. Any hopes that this party can play any sort of progressive role are entirely baseless.

If you are serious in your support of the train drivers then you must seriously address the role and perspective of the Left Party and not talk your way around it with the argument that there are, after all, lots of members who share a different opinion to that of Gysi.

The second argument with which I disagree concerns your depiction of the “avant-garde” role of the GDL and your hope that it will be able to “draw in the rest of the working class” along militant lines.

There are a number of reasons why the opposition by train drivers developed within the framework of the GDL. A major factor is the reactionary role played by Transnet and the GDBA, whose subordination to the Railways executive defies description. Train drivers looked upon the GDL as the only possibility of escaping from this corporatist straitjacket.

To conclude from this, however, that the GDL represents some sort of militant avant-garde is utterly false. It is a conservative, profession-based trade union whose perspectives do not differ fundamentally from those of other trade unions. In recent weeks the head of the GDL, Manfred Schell, has desperately sought to reach a deal with the Railways executive.

The fact that this has so far proved impossible is entirely due to the intransigency of the Railways

management, which is determined to crush the GDL. The aim is to set an example and make clear that the same degree of ruthlessness will be used to smash any future resistance to wage and welfare cuts. There are obvious parallels to the smashing of the US air traffic controllers union PATCO by US President Ronald Reagan in 1981. This was the starting point for a series of comprehensive attacks on the entire American working class. A defeat of the train drivers now would have similar consequences. This is why Gysi's attack on the train drivers is so politically reprehensible.

The train drivers' struggle has long since extended beyond the framework of a normal contract dispute. It has developed into a confrontation with the state. On the one side stand the Railways executive, the European Union, the German government and all parliamentary parties, the business federations, a majority of the media and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB). On the other side stand the train drivers, who enjoy the sympathy of broad layers of the population. Many workers and their families have been victims of social decline for many years and have concluded the time is ripe to go on the offensive.

This struggle cannot be won, however, on the basis of the limited union standpoint of the GDL. It requires the building of a new party on the basis of an international, socialist perspective, which is able to unite the working class throughout Germany and internationally against the combined forces of the ruling elite.

With socialist greetings,  
Ulrich Rippert



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