

GDL leadership prepares sell-out

German train drivers must take strike into their own hands

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The latest contract negotiations between the management of German Railways (Deutsche Bahn-DB) and the GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer) train drivers' trade union have led to one result: the GDL leaders involved in the talks have agreed to call off all strike action until the end of January. The union has thereby stripped train drivers of their most important weapon at a point when their strike could have served to enormously step up pressure on the DB executive.

There is no legal or contractual basis requiring the GDL to take such a step. It is an entirely voluntary concession by the union leadership. The obligation laid down in German law restricting workers from taking industrial action became invalid with the expiry of the train drivers contract and the massive vote for action in August, when nearly 96 percent of GDL members declared in favour of an unlimited strike.

The argument now being put forward that the long interval without strike action will help speed up contract negotiations is utterly false. In fact, it is quite the opposite—a powerful strike would be much more effective in ending the uncompromising attitude struck by the DB executive and its backers in the German government.

DB boss Hartmut Mehdorn expressed his considerable satisfaction with the concession made by the GDL leadership and made clear that he regards it as a signal that the trade union is ready to make major compromises on other questions. He was quite aware that the GDL decision would be unpopular with ordinary train drivers and has therefore agreed on a single payment of 800 euros, which is to be paid to train drivers “rapidly and without complications,” if possible this month.

This single payment is nothing but a “sweetener” aimed at assisting GDL chairman Manfred Schell in imposing the two-month break in strike action. The 800 euros will be added to the normal salary and subject to a high level of tax. In addition, the payment is regarded as a payment in lieu of the wage increase demanded by train drivers for the period of mid-June until the end of the year—although no concrete wage contract has yet been agreed upon.

Even if the GDL had only been able to achieve a percentage of its original claim and obtain a deal worth 150 euros per month, train drivers would have still have been entitled to a bigger sum in back payments than that now being offered by

DB management. In the event of a lump payment, a large part will be deducted in tax anyway and consequently returned to state coffers.

The principal demand of the train drivers was and remains the granting of an “independent contract.” The drivers' wage demand for an increase of 31 percent only became possible after the GDL quit the contract coalition that included the two other rail unions, Transnet and the rail officials' union, the GDBA. The GDL undertook this move following massive pressure from its membership, which opposed the series of wage cuts and attacks on working conditions agreed to by Transnet and the GDBA.

Since then, DB management has stubbornly refused to grant the GDL its own contract enabling train drivers to independently conduct their own contract negotiations. The demand for an independent contract was always bound up with breaking free from the contractual straitjacket of Transnet and the GDBA. And this was something that the DB management, which actively supports Transnet financially and regards its as its own “sweetheart union,” was determined to prevent at all costs.

Then, this Wednesday, the GDL suddenly published a half-page press statement with the title, “GDL receives independent contract!” The statement declares that “in a two-day negotiation marathon” the GDL had been able to win an “important partial victory.” It is striking that the statement then merely goes on to say that the contract contains “both the payment and work time regulations for train drivers and the remaining contract issues, for example, general wage agreement regulations.” Nothing is said to explain how the contract involves independence from that governing the other two rail unions. Following enquiries by WSWs editorial staff, it is clear that ordinary train drivers have also been left in the dark on this issue.

A closer look at the sparse, and on occasion contradictory, information in the statement reveals that there is nothing that can be regarded as a binding agreement by management for an independent contract for the GDL. It seems highly likely that the GDL leadership is holding back detailed information in order to deliberately mislead its members.

On the same day of the GDL's “partial victory,” the head of

the Transnet union, Norbert Hansen, gave an interview on German radio explaining that the partial agreement between the GDL and rail management is based on a new payment structure agreed to by the union.

According to Hansen, this new contract involves the following: In future there will be a so-called basis contract agreement, which regulates about 80 percent of issues dealt with in any new contract. On this basis, there is to be a single contract agreement for more than a dozen different groups of rail employees, which regulates specific issues on the basis of individual occupational groups. These so-called function group contract agreements will, however, be subordinate to the basis contract agreement, Hansen stressed.

The self-sufficiency of a contract for train drivers consists in the fact that its own union—the GDL—draws up its contract proposals, and not Transnet (although some drivers are Transnet members).

The relationship between the single and the basis contract is to be regulated by a “mutual acknowledgment procedure.” According to Hansen, “This means that the GDL would sign an agreement acknowledging the basis contract agreement, which we negotiate, and then we would do the same for a train drivers’ contract, which the GDL negotiates.”

If this is correct, then it means that the GDL has been led via the back door back into its former contract coalition with Transnet and the GDBA. This means, in turn, subordination to the contract policies of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB)—precisely the result desired by the DB executive, the German government and Transnet. The attempt by train drivers to break free from the straitjacket of the DGB would be stopped in its tracks.

Even if this surrender by the GDL comes with a relatively high one-off payment, it nevertheless represents a defeat for the train drivers and all workers. In the first place, the result would be to strengthen the role of the DGB bureaucracy, which is the most important tool of company executives and the government for the enforcement of low wages and reduced levels of social and working conditions.

Secondly, the introduction of job-specific “function group contract agreements” will lead to increasing divisions among rail employee, enabling management to increase its extortion of the workforce. And thirdly, this fragmentation of rail personnel, accompanied by a strengthening of the grip of the union bureaucracies, is a direct preparation for the privatisation of the railways—a move that has been supported by Transnet for a long time.

Train drivers must act to prevent the sell-out of their strike and call the GDL negotiation leaders and executive to account. They must demand an end to the secret negotiations being conducted by their trade union leadership. GDL members must insist and enforce their democratic right to unrestricted information.

It was not the union executive or the GDL negotiating team

that voted by more than 95 percent in the summer for strike action, and it was train drivers and ordinary GDL members who carried the strike in the face of income losses and repeated provocations by the DB executive committee. The GDL leadership has no right to strangle the strike and leave its members in the dark over the negotiations it has carried out.

Train drivers must now take over the conduct of the dispute:

We repeat what we wrote just a week ago when we warned in an Open Letter of the danger of a sell-out: “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!”



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