

German train drivers union announces new strikes

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22 December 2007

On December 19, the German train drivers union GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer) broke off contract talks with the management of German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) and two other railway unions—Transnet and the GDBA—and announced its intention to carry out new, unlimited strikes starting from January 7. This represents a significant intensification of the train drivers' contract dispute, which has now been going on for nine months.

For the past three weeks the GDL has carried out negotiations with the DB executive committee and refrained from any strike action. In the course of the talks it became clear that the DB management is not prepared to make any compromises. Instead, it has sought to use the period of negotiations to isolate the train drivers and break their union.

At a press conference in Frankfurt-Main, GDL Chairman Manfred Schell said the union had decided to break off discussions because in the course of the negotiations the DB executive had backtracked from its promise to grant the union its own “independent contract agreement.”

Management had demanded that the GDL agree to a so-called “cooperation contract” with the other two unions, Transnet and the GDBA, before any negotiations could be carried out on the specific content of a contract for the GDL. To accept such a proposal would mean to abandon the GDL's key demand to negotiate independently on pay and work hours. “We will not agree to such a move,” Schell said.

Schell's deputy, Claus Weselsky, told *Spiegel Online*: “The GDL was being called upon to vote in favour of the contract agreement it had once had with Transnet and the GDBA, and... if the unions could not agree on their demands the issue would go to arbitration, even before any demands had been put to management. Can

you imagine! And this would apply to the current dispute.”

Weselsky accused DB management of seeking to make the GDL look “ridiculous.” He said, “To put it bluntly, we were not even to be allowed to negotiate what train drivers could earn.”

Instead, the contract would pertain only to matters of minor importance, “such as whether the employer savings bonus should remain or be increased. We are talking here about 13 euros per month.”

With regard to the GDL's wage claim—the original claim by the union was for a raise of up to 30 percent—the DB management were only prepared to offer 4.5 percent, i.e., the same deal as that already negotiated by Transnet and the GDBA. A new classification of the wage structure would make possible a further increase of two percent. “That was too little for us,” Weselsky said. “We want double-digit wage increases.”

In addition, the DB executive refused to recognise shunting drivers as train drivers, thereby depriving the GDL of the right to negotiate on behalf of this group of workers.

The GDL announced strikes in goods and passenger rail service beginning January 7. Schell told the press conference that, in contrast to the union's former position of taking only limited action, the forthcoming strikes would be open-ended. The strike action would be continued until the DB management presented an “acceptable offer,” and would continue even during new negotiations with the executive. The disputes would be ended only if “we are absolutely convinced we are heading in the right direction,” the GDL chairman said.

The DB executive reacted promptly. The company announced in a statement that it was withdrawing all

previous “offers and concessions” to the GDL. The executive is now demanding from the GDL a “regulated arbitration procedure.”

Political and media outlets immediately fell in behind the DB executive and began a vicious propaganda campaign against the train drivers. The sharpest attacks came from representatives of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB).

The economics speaker for the SPD parliamentary faction, Rainer Wend, declared that if the GDL once again announces strikes, “We will take a clear stand in opposition. There will be no solidarity.” Wend accused the GDL of “seeking to realise its own special interests at the expense of the public.”

The chairman of the German police union, Konrad Freiberg, expressly warned the GDL against calling new strikes. Otherwise it would lose “any remaining sympathy.” Other union officials called the new strikes “contractual imbecility.”

Transnet Chairman Norbert Hansen and his GDBA colleague, Klaus-Dieter Hommel, put out a joint statement in which they declared: “The whole thing is just becoming absurd.” Both men said they would do everything in their power to oppose renewed strike action by train drivers.

They announced their intention of concluding their own contract agreement with rail management for those train drivers organized in their unions. There are an estimated 5,000 drivers organised in Transnet and the GDBA, and the aim of such an initiative is clearly to isolate the GDL and split the train drivers.

This latest development underscores the urgency of organizing the broadest solidarity and support for the train drivers. They are to be made an object lesson because they have dared to defy the contract policies of the German trade union federation DGB and its associated trade unions. Following years of declining incomes, the train drivers opted to fight for better wages and working conditions.

Such a struggle, however, demands a complete break with the trade union bureaucracy and the SPD, which are openly working as strike-breakers. With its utterly limited trade union perspective, the GDL is unable to carry out such a struggle. Their repeated readiness to strike a compromise has only served to encourage DB Chairman Hartmut Mehdorn and the rail executive to

ever sharper attacks and provocations.

Train drivers must take the strike into their own hands. It is necessary to extend the struggle beyond the limited framework laid down by the GDL leadership and begin a broad political offensive. Action committees must be established with the aim of winning the cooperation of all other rail personnel, as well as workers from other industries. Such action committees must develop the solidarity which already exists in broad layers of the population and turn it into concrete support.

Above all, a new political perspective is required, based on the need to consciously transform the train drivers’ fight into a direct political offensive of the entire working class against the grand coalition government and the corporate-financial elite whose interests it represents. This political struggle must, moreover, be conducted on an all-European scale and not limited to Germany. As the recent strike by French rail workers has demonstrated, the attacks on rail workers are being carried out on a European-wide basis, as part of the offensive of European capital, coordinated through the European Union, against the jobs and living standards of workers across the continent.



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