

Germany: Train drivers union submits to government and management

Drivers must reject the new contract!

Ludwig Niethammer
19 January 2008

Last Sunday, the German train drivers' union, GDL, and Deutsche Bahn AG agreed on the key elements of a new contract after 10 months of unusually sharp clashes. The GDL leadership has largely dropped the drivers' original demands for a considerable wage increase and a separate collective agreement.

Although not all the details are yet known, one thing is already clear—the compromise agreed to in no way meets the demands for which the drivers have fought for months. The wage increase, which averages 7 percent, amounts to less than a quarter of the original 31 percent sought by the drivers! Even worse is the likelihood that the GDL leadership has completely abandoned the “independent collective agreement,” which was the train drivers' core demand.

According to what is presently known, the deal includes a one-off payment of €800 to cover the period from July 1, 2007, to February 29, 2008 (equivalent to about a 3 percent increase in real terms). From March 1, the increase is pegged at 8 percent, and from September 1, there will be a further 3 percent rise. The new contract will run until February 2009, after which the workweek will be shortened from 41 to 40 hours.

GDL representatives have called this a success. They talk about an average 11 percent wage increase for train drivers. GDL leader Manfred Schell announced the union had achieved a separate collective agreement. But examining the facts more closely leads to a different conclusion.

Firstly, if the staggered wage increases are calculated over the 19-month period of the contract, then train drivers are merely receiving 5 percent more pay. The 40-hour week from February 2009 will have little effect on earnings. Since the new wages structure being introduced from March 2008 is based on professional experience and other qualifications, it will sow divisions among train drivers. According to the GDL, the wage increase will vary between 7 and 15 percent. According to initial estimates, more than half of train drivers

will at best receive just 7 percent.

The GDL has also had to admit that only 12,000 out of 20,000 train drivers will benefit under the new rules. Moreover, some 8,000 train drivers with civil servant status, and drivers who work exclusively in the shunting yards and the rest of the train crew, for whom the GDL originally demanded equal treatment, are being hung out to dry.

The first reactions from the Transnet and GDBA unions, both of which stabbed the GDL drivers in the back and vehemently opposed the strike, are revealing. GDBA leader Klaus-Dieter Hommel said, “We believe that the deal reached falls within the framework that we had agreed months ago with management.” And Transnet's leading negotiator, Alexander Kirchner, told the *Berliner Zeitung*, “It remains to be seen whether they really achieved any more.” He viewed the deal as “roughly the same” as that accepted by Transnet and GDBA in the summer—a 4.5 percent increase in wages plus a €600 one-off payment, plus 10 percent by 2010. Moreover, Kirchner said it remained a fact that future GDL settlements would have to fit in with the overall contract.

If his assessment is correct, and much evidence points in this direction, then the GDL has not only negotiated a lousy wages deal, but it has also submitted to the strictures of the existing collective bargaining partners—the rail management, Transnet and GDBA. Also, the recent announcements by GDL spokeswoman Seibert that the GDL would accept the existing pattern agreement and that “we will now seek talks with Transnet and GDBA” point in this direction.

A similar view was also expressed by the union researcher Josef Esser. He doubts the “autonomy” of the contract agreed by the GDL. In a press interview, Esser said, “There will still be an overall pattern contract, which will deal with about 80 percent of everything. And then there are specific collective agreements for the six defined professional areas where working hours and salaries are negotiated separately.” One of the six areas would be the train drivers, for which the

GDL would be responsible. “But this does not mean,” Esser said, “that it would be completely independent, and able to negotiate just for its members and their wages, but it would be integrated into the overall system. This is a step forward for the GDL, but it is not the maximum demand for an ‘autonomous collective agreement’ as the GDL is now proclaiming.”

In the summer of 2002, the GDL announced it was leaving the collective bargaining coalition with Transnet and GDBA union officials. Only then, it claimed, could train drivers oppose the drastic wage cuts and reduction in social standards to which these organisations had agreed.

This was the significance of the call for an “autonomous collective agreement.” Only then would the demand for a 31 percent raise be possible. Since then, however, the Deutsche Bahn management has stubbornly refused to agree to a contract with the GDL that would make it possible for the drivers to independently determine the content of the collective agreement. The demand for a separate collective agreement was always part of the struggle to break out of the contract straitjacket of Transnet and GDBA. And it is precisely this that management—which regards Transnet as its “house union,” financed through a variety of channels—wanted to prevent under any circumstances.

The limited trade union perspective of the GDL leadership under Manfred Schell and Claus Weselsky resulted in a constant willingness to make compromises, hesitation and opportunist tactics that held back the drivers’ struggle. At the same time, Deutsche Bahn’s CEO Hartmut Mehdorn launched increasingly harsh attacks and provocations.

Mehdorn was initially not willing to grant any further concessions in early December, when the GDL again refused to call further strike action and entered negotiations without any preconditions. Mehdorn, together with the existing “contract cartel”—including the Transnet and GDBD unions, the Social Democratic Party and Left Party and the grand coalition—held out until the end rather than cede any autonomy to the drivers.

When just before Christmas the GDL again stood virtually empty-handed, it was forced to cancel negotiations and call an indefinite strike from January 7. Once again, leading union and SPD officials spouted their indignation and attacked the train drivers. Rainer Wend, from the SPD parliamentary faction, repeatedly accused the GDL of wanting “to pursue its particular interests to the detriment of the common good.”

At the beginning of the year, the train drivers’ struggle was still receiving strong support among the wider population, prompting transport minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD) to intervene and seek a settlement. At all costs, the government wanted to avoid the drivers’ struggle

coinciding with the collective bargaining process in the public service, which was just starting. Moreover, resistance to the policies of the grand coalition government is increasing and could find a clear expression in the state elections being held in two weeks’ time. Under these conditions, Tiefensee urged a quick end to the conflict and called on railway chief Mehdorn to abandon his provocative line, at least in part.

Train drivers must not give way and must reject this deal! Re-entering the old “contract cartel” would not only mean a further deterioration in conditions for train drivers, but it would weaken the struggle that has just begun to liberate workers from the clutches of the union bureaucracy.

In a situation in which labour struggles are just beginning in the public sector and in some important industries, and when resistance to the government is increasing, it is important not to retreat.

The wavering and endless compromises of the GDL leaders are directly related to the fact that the old union conceptions of “social partnership” are useless in opposing the provocations and attacks by the Deutsche Bahn management and the government that stands behind it. The GDL is seeking a “workable compromise,” but such a thing does not exist, and thus it can only prepare a defeat.

It is necessary for union members to intervene now courageously and decisively. The struggle must be reorganised from the bottom up. This requires a fundamentally new strategy and perspective. Instead of the profit interests of big business, it is the needs of working people that must predominate, together with socialist objectives. Production in general and major companies such as the Deutsche Bahn in particular, which are presently controlled by a financial aristocracy, must be placed at the service of society as a whole.

Only on this programmatic basis is it possible to establish close relations with all other workers, and develop an international strategy based on uniting workers across all national boundaries against the monopoly power of the corporations, the government, the unions and the European Union.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)