

German train drivers oppose contract deal

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The leadership of the train drivers' union—the GDL (Deutsche Lokomotivführer)—was determined to end its long drawn-out wage dispute with German Railways (Deutsche Bahn—DB) by the end of January. GDL Chairman Manfred Schell repeatedly made clear that this was the main objective of the union, and DB management was also keen to terminate the labour dispute, which began last summer.

Finally, on January 29, a jubilant Manfred Schell appeared before the press and spoke of a “historic day in the history of the GDL.” The contract was “completed,” he said, apart from the “personal and technical areas of coverage.” DB personnel head Margret Suckale concurred and announced, “We have an agreement.”

But while Schell was enjoying himself before the press at the Berlin Marriott hotel, he failed to notice that a number of angry train drivers had infiltrated themselves among the journalists. They then told *Spiegel-Online* and other media outlets of their dissatisfaction with the negotiated compromise. “The mood amongst the rank and file is pretty bad,” one of the train drivers said. “Many colleagues say: This is not what I fought for.” Another train driver summed up the sentiments of the GDL membership: “With a basic salary of €2,000 the agreed 11 percent increase is not even enough to fill up the tank of my car.”

The train drivers also deplored the way in which the GDL leadership had conducted the negotiations and failed to keep the membership properly informed. The GD executive committee had continually returned for negotiations with the DB management while calling upon the membership to remain calm. Any criticism from members “was stymied,” one outraged driver reported, adding, “This is something we will not tolerate. It's similar to the conditions which exist at Transnet.”

Should it be implemented, the proposed deal

represents a rotten compromise that awards drivers only a fraction of their original demand for a 31 percent wage increase. Drivers had pushed for this increase to compensate for their miserably low level of basic wages and to regain some of the decline in wages they have suffered for many years.

It is useful to review the background of the dispute. In the summer of 2002, the GDL quit its joint contract with the trade union Transnet and the rail officials' union, the GDBA. Train drivers had concluded this was the only way to combat the drastic wage cuts and attacks on social and working conditions that had been agreed to by these organisations year after year.

This was the significance of the train drivers' demand for an “independent contract agreement”; the wage demand of 31 percent was only possible on such a basis. Since then, the DB executive committee has stubbornly refused to agree to a contract with the GDL, which would allow train drivers to independently negotiate their own wages and conditions. DB management was always opposed to the GDL's attempts to break out of the contract straitjacket imposed by Transnet and the GDBA. Transnet, in particular, is regarded by DB as its “house trade union” and the company finances the union through various channels.

According to the details that have so far emerged regarding the latest deal, DB has agreed to a single payment of just €800 to compensate drivers for the past eight months, during which time they have been in dispute. This corresponds to a real increase of wages for this period of approximately 3 percent! An 8 percent increase is envisaged for the start of March, with an additional 3 percent from September 1. The contract is due to run until February 2009, and during this period, the working week is to be reduced from 41 to 40 hours. On average, most train drivers will receive a salary increase of well under 10 percent. In addition,

other sections of rail personnel who were to be included in the deal are now to be excluded. This applies to shunt drivers and presumably new hires as well.

There is a simple explanation for the haste on the part of both sides to reach a deal and GDL's readiness to accept substantial concessions. The train drivers' demand for a decent income found support among broad layers of the population. At the same time, strikes are currently taking place in branches of the German public service, and millions of workers and clerical employees in other industries have made clear they are demanding increases and an end to a policy of stagnating wages and wage cuts.

Nearly all of those trade unions in Germany that have accepted contracts involving no wage increases—from the public service union Verdi to the industrial workers' union IG-Metall—currently feel under pressure to demand double-digit wage increases.

Under these conditions, it was necessary for management to end the train drivers' dispute as soon as possible in order to prevent the emergence of a broad strike movement. Such a strike movement would inevitably be directed against the German grand coalition government and could lead to a political radicalisation of the working class, which the social-democratic DGB (Federation of German Trade Unions) and the Left Party would no longer be able to control.

This is the significance of the current train drivers' deal. There is much to indicate that the GDL leadership has also caved in with regard to the central demand for its own contract agreement—thereby restoring the former joint contract with Transnet and the GDBA. The negotiations on this issue are being carried out behind locked doors between DB Chairman Hartmut Mehdorn with the three trade unions (Transnet, GDBA and GDL), and one should fear the worst.

It appears that the GDL has accepted the framework of the so-called “Brandenburg Gate model.” According to this model, the GDL would accept an individual contract regulating working times and payment. In return, the GDL would agree to cooperate with the two trade unions, Transnet and the GDBA, in a comprehensive contract pact. In other words, all issues—including the range of wage demands—would have to be coordinated by the GDL with the two other trade unions.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the GDL has

agreed to a “fourth collective agreement,” whereby the GDL commits itself to negotiating only on behalf of train drivers—and no other group of rail personnel—until the end of 2015. At the same time, the current deal is linked to the pledge by the GDL to work together with Transnet and the GDBA. Should the latter unions find a pretext of their own to end the cooperation with the GDL, then this would invalidate the contract deal struck by the GDL. This means that Transnet and the GDBA would have an indirect right of veto with regard to the contract that Manfred Schell continues to describe as “independent.”

The current situation demands a courageous and decisive intervention by GDL members—in particular against any attempt to impose the current deal on the membership. Despite the fact that German industrial law demands that the union leadership hold a ballot of members to decide whether or not the contract is to be accepted, Manfred Schell has recently declared that a strike ballot is unnecessary. This standpoint must be vigorously opposed.

It is a fundamental democratic right that a strike called by a vote of the membership can only be terminated by the membership. Schell's opposition to a ballot is an indication of the union leadership's fear that the current deal will be voted down. GDL members must insist on and enforce a strike ballot, and the dispute must be reorganised by the rank and file independently of the union leadership.



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