

GDL union completes sell-out of German train drivers' struggle

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After a strike that has lasted nearly one year, the German train drivers union, GDL, has made a final agreement with Deutsche Bahn (DB—German Railways) that accepts all the basic demands of the company.

Last week, GDL had called for an indefinite strike that would have crippled regional and national passenger and freight rail services. It would have also affected the Berlin suburban railway. Berlin's bus and subway train drivers have been on strike since March 5, meaning a strike by GDL members would have brought the entire public transportation system in the German capital to a standstill.

The bus and subway train drivers had been extremely enthusiastic at the prospect of broadening their strike front. Their demands for higher wages have fallen on deaf ears within the Berlin state senate, governed by a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party.

As it turned out though, things developed differently.

In the late afternoon on Sunday, March 9, the day before the strike was to start, GDL leader Manfred Schell and the chairman of Deutsche Bahn, Hartmut Mehdorn, held a joint press conference in the DB tower in Potsdamer Platz. Both men were visibly relieved as they announced that they were able to avert the strike at the last second. The announcement was preceded by three days of lengthy, secret negotiations, in which German Transport Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee (SPD) also participated.

At the start of February, GDL had signed a preliminary wage contract that included a wage increase of up to 11 percent by September 1, 2008, a one-off payment of 800 euros and a 1-hour reduction in the working week to 40 hours starting February 2009. The leadership of the GDL was satisfied with this outcome, although it only amounted to a fraction of its initial demand for a 31 percent wage increase. GDL also abandoned its demand that the wage agreement include train conductors and others working on trains.

At the time, Schell and Mehdorn both declared they had come to an agreement when the February contract was signed. They said that all that had to be done was to work out the fine print of a general wage contract, which was to be finalised by the beginning of March. However, DB management and Transnet—the largest rail union and the one that Mehdorn treats

as his own in-house union—then attempted to force GDL to sign an agreement that subjected GDL to the same wage contract as Transnet and GDBA, the other rail union. From the very start of their dispute, train drivers had demanded their own separate contract agreement in order to free themselves from the yoke of Transnet and the GDBA.

Even Heiner Geissler (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), who acted as a mediator in previous negotiations between GDL and Deutsche Bahn, voiced his opposition to Transnet's blatant attempt at extortion and warned that DB should not try to force GDL to sign its "own death warrant."

Nevertheless, DB management persevered. It insisted that a general wage contract could only be made if GDL agreed to this key clause. Although the GDL had already made far-reaching concessions, which has already caused widespread outrage among its members, DB management did not budge in its attempt to force train drivers to their knees and prevent the GDL from obtaining any form of independence from the other two rail unions.

It was only when GDL called an indefinite national strike that DB management changed its mind. However, this was not before the company tried legal avenues to have the prospective strike declared illegal.

With Berlin public transport workers on an indefinite strike, and strikes taking place in many sectors of the public service, representatives of the German government and other trade unions stepped in and told both the GDL and Deutsche Bahn that further strikes were unwanted and that everything should be done to avoid them. Under this political pressure, the GDL leadership caved in, called off the strike and made a rotten compromise.

The decision by GDL to cancel the strike at the last minute was a stab in the back of the striking Berlin transport workers. Its actions made clear that GDL is as opposed to any kind of serious struggle against the DB management and the German government, which stands behind it, as Transnet and Verdi, the public service union. Further, the GDL leadership has backtracked so far on the issues of an independent wage agreement (from Transnet and GDBA) and wage increases that nothing at all is left of its original demands.

One of the clauses in the new agreement stipulates that GDL,

as well as Transnet and GDBA, must recognise and accept each other's wage agreements.

GDL is a relatively small trade union. It represents train drivers, but not all of them. It has agreed to refrain from representing the 3,000 signal controllers and schedulers. All other occupations are to be represented by either Transnet or GDBA. The train drivers' strike also included thousands of workers who are not GDL members—for example, train personnel. They are not covered by the new agreement, meaning they will get nothing despite their struggle and sacrifice and the promises made to them by GDL.

The new agreement also prohibits GDL from recruiting members from other occupations.

The only concession that DB management made was to allow GDL to represent new train drivers hired through a temporary employment agency, as well as train drivers employed by DB subsidiaries.

While a special cooperation treaty with the other unions aimed at tying the GDL to Transnet and the GDBA was not agreed, a “supervisory group” was formed whose task is to facilitate cooperation between the rail unions. This means that all three unions will now have to agree to the contracts negotiated by the other unions before they come into force. Neither of the unions addressed the obvious question of what would happen if Transnet rejected demands made by GDL or if Transnet did not recognise a GDL-negotiated contract.

The details about the agreement with Deutsche Bahn made public to date lead to just one conclusion: that the independence of GDL has been sacrificed, and that in future, major decisions regarding wage agreements can only be made in accord with Transnet and GDBA. In other words, GDL has accepted DB's original demand for a common wage contract between the unions, only in a different form.

The new wage agreement contains only a fraction of the original demand for a 31 percent pay increase. Most train drivers will receive an increase of between 4.5 and 7.0 percent over a period of 18 months. Under these conditions, the one-off payment of 800 euros that covers the period of July 2007 to February 2008 can only be seen as a miserly consolation payment.

Many train drivers and GDL members employed in other parts of the company have decisively rejected the proposed contract and are demanding a members' vote in order that it be rejected. Below, we reprint some comments from Deutsche Bahn employees posted to an Internet discussion forum shortly after the agreement was announced:

A train driver from Osnabrück:

“The strike has now been cancelled. According to the press, Deutsche Bahn and GDL made a compromise. What does this mean? According to GDL, everything is OK—workers will profit from the contract. What points did GDL compromise on?

“It's strange that both GDL and Deutsche Bahn have already signed the wage agreement, which is to apply retrospectively

from March 1. When will members be able to vote on it? Some of us are angry about this new deal. Should the members be simply ignored?”

Other train drivers were angered by the fact that the 3,000 signal controllers will not be represented by GDL, but by Transnet.

“This is really the last straw!!!! I'm so angry I could.... If we can't even get all train drivers into the same wage contract, how are we supposed to include other train personnel?” wrote one worker.

Another commented sarcastically:

“That's just great! Now I know where I stand and will act accordingly. Thanks a lot to union negotiators. GDL can expect to receive a few membership cancellations.”

A signal controller from Leipzig:

“Well thanks a lot! Now I'm a 2nd-class train driver. Our struggle in the strike was obviously not enough. We, like all those who struck, suffered financially and put up with the campaign against us by the employer, yet we stuck to our guns. For what? Transnet train drivers, who did absolutely nothing [they did not participate in the strike], are to be included in the new wage deal, but not me. Am I not worthy, just because my job is associated with ‘shunting’ and not ‘rail line’?”

“Please tell me what I am doing in a ‘Union of German Train Drivers’...if I cannot be included as a train driver? My decision has been made!”

A suburban train driver from Munich:

“All the things that were important to me: breaks, working hours and rest days...everything lost!”

A driver from Berlin-Lichtenberg:

“We went on strike last year in order to take the entire train crew away from the whip of [Transnet head] Hansen. It was not just about a few percentage points in wage increases. It was about working hours, about justice in working hours for other occupation.... It was about so much.

“The end agreement is not even a fraction of what we fought for. In contrast, with a little dirt money, which only the train drivers will see (don't misunderstand me—you deserve it), Deutsche Bahn has bought off its most feared union.”



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