

Germany: Deutsche Bahn slashes Berlin's transport services

Emma Bode, Verena Nees
20 July 2009

Recent developments in Berlin give the population a preview of the future state of the city's public transport and other public services should the current wave of privatisations be allowed to continue. Berlin's S-Bahn network (urban railway), on which a million passengers, and thus the entire public transport system relies, is heading for collapse.

After an S-Bahn train derailed at Kaulsdorf railway station, and death and injury were only narrowly avoided on May 1, a technical investigation revealed the cause of the accident to be a broken wheel. The railway management was quick to assure the Federal Railway Department (EBA), the relevant supervisory body, that trains would be inspected once a week in future and, as a rule, replaced after travelling 1.2 million kilometres. However, another safety inspection at the end of June revealed that management had continued to allow unchecked S-Bahn trains to operate. The EBA then ordered the immediate suspension of trains not regularly inspected. Some 380 trains from the most up-to-date Bombardier production series were taken out of service.

Most affected by the disruption were Berlin's commuters, particularly those from outer-lying suburbs, and visitors to the city who are largely dependent on the S-Bahn network. Only two-carriage trains remain operational, and a great number of morning rush-hour services have been cancelled. Passengers often have to wait 20 minutes and more for the crowded trains with room rarely to be found for prams and bicycles. Service information for passengers is at a minimum.

Even more severe restrictions in services are in store for this week. Up to 70 percent of the S-Bahn trains will not be running, the route between Bahnhof Zoo and Ostbahnhof will be completely closed for two-and-half weeks, as will a number of shorter routes. Additional regional trains will be made available, but these can only make stops at stations with special platforms for main-line services. Passengers will have to walk to these stations or reach them by means of BVG (the city's main public transport operator) underground trains or buses.

On June 2, the initial reaction of Deutsche Bahn AG (DB), the national parent company of Berlin's S-Bahn, was to sack the entire S-Bahn management. In this way a pathetic attempt was made to hide the fact that responsibility for the catastrophe

lies with the DB concern itself and its policy of privatisation, sponsored by former DB chairman Hartmut Mehdorn and backed by the federal government. Rumours are circulating that the urban network's disastrous condition is the result of DB's attempt to tart up its balance books before the concern's entry onto the stock exchange, planned for this October and postponed only because of the financial crisis.

In this year alone, the S-Bahn will hand €87.7 million over to its parent company, and €100 million next year—almost half the amount of the subsidy—transferred from budgetary funds by the Berlin Senate to the city railway service. From 2005 to 2008, this sum increased sixfold from €9 million to €56 million in line with a “control and profit sharing contract,” obliging the profits to be passed on to the DB.

The profits were achieved by implementing ruthless austerity measures at the expense of passengers and employees. Since 2005, four railway workshops have been closed, including the most important at Friedrichsfelde. A quarter of the jobs, especially of the technical staff, have been dismantled and 80 S-Bahn trains taken out of service. Instead of repairing the trains, many of them were scrapped. The number of available vehicles declined in spite of passenger numbers rising by 6 percent. Costs were also cut in relation to the provision of service. Cooperation between the trade union and the works council led to a gradual reduction in platform staff with train drivers taking over responsibilities of other railway staff. The company plans to close 23 ticket purchase counters.

In 2007, some 33 people were injured in accidents on the S-Bahn, resulting from improperly performed maintenance work associated with the train's braking system. Press interviews with train drivers reveal that hardly a day goes by without technical defects being reported in locomotives and other forms of public transport.

Markus Hecht, leading railway vehicle specialist at the Technical University of Berlin, explained on Berlin's RBB radio station that, eight years ago, the Berlin Senate and S-Bahn management were given a report pointing out the unsuitability of the production series 481 train wheels used in the city's railway network. It was claimed that the strength of the material in the wheels in relation to the kind of disc brakes being used was insufficient. However, the senate and S-Bahn management

rejected the experts' recommendation that the wheels be gradually replaced, arguing that no money was available for a rapid overhaul.

Berlin's SPD (Social Democratic Party) and Left Party coalition senate government now declare they are scandalised by the performance of the S-Bahn and have announced a subsidy cut due to the negligent performance of the S-Bahn management. In fact, the senate not only drew up the austerity measures for the city's transport system; it also worked to enforce them. Closely cooperating in 2007 with the trade unions Transnet (transport union), Verdi (public servants union) and GDBA (state public servants union), the coalition negotiated contracts with the city railway and the BVG. The securing of these contracts—valid until 2017 (S-Bahn) and 2020 (BVG)—was presented as an alternative to privatising Berlin's local transport network and placing it in the hands of an independent provider.

According to the European Commission's specifications for market liberalisation, the local transport system had to be opened up for privatisation on the European market by January 1, 2008. After arranging the public transport contract and the trade unions' compliance with cost-cutting measures, the senate saw to it that the DB and the BVG became the most financially attractive providers with the S-Bahn—including its underground and bussing networks—remaining under the control of the DB and the city administration.

The senate also wanted to insure that Deutsche Bahn AG remains the city's favoured provider and that it has the chance to retain the S-Bahn network for the next tendering round in 2017. This course has never had anything to do with a principled opposition to privatisation in the interest of employees and passengers. The SPD and Left Party have only sought to continue their traditionally good relations with management, supervisory boards and trade unions in the state enterprises—relations that were always associated with posts on the supervisory boards and executive committees and had until now lent their government a degree of stability.

The transport contract provided for an annual subsidy of €225 million for the S-Bahn. The contract set down as a precondition an employment agreement whereby the house wage contract, valid until January 1, 2007, was dissolved and DB's national company wage contract adopted by the S-Bahn staff. Working hours were extended from 35 hours to 39 hours per week, while about 900 of the company's 2,700 jobs were cut.

Heiner Wegner, chairman of the Berlin S-Bahn works council and member of the Transnet trade union, recently complained in a press interview about the "exaggerated staff cuts" in the company's maintenance and servicing divisions. He said the workshops are being sacrificed to profit-making and demanded that the 2007 employment agreement, which bears his signature, be declared "null and void." In doing so, he is only trying to save his own skin. In fact, as a member of the transport committee, Heiner Wegner has long cooperated

extremely closely with the Berlin administration, and the austerity measures could not have been implemented without the help of representatives of the trade unions and works councils.

Meanwhile, it has become known from the railway company's strategy programme, "Qualify & Qualify Plus Portfolio," that cost-cutting in the S-Bahn was a significant part of plans for entry onto the stock exchange. According to a recent statement by the parliamentary Green fraction on July 9, the matching of "the number of train carriages to what was actually required" and the optimisation of maintenance services were defined in the section of that programme entitled "Project X: Optimisation of the Urban Rail Network." Both the number of vehicles and the intervals of time between trains were to be reduced, while the S-Bahn's profits were to be increased to €125 million for the year 2010.

Deutsche Bahn's entry onto the stock exchange was approved last summer by its supervisory board, which included representatives of the employees as well as federal parliamentarians, but was temporarily postponed last October due to the economic crisis. The board also supported the plan proposed by the Transnet trade union. At the beginning of last year, Norbert Hansen, the recently sacked staff board member and former chairman of Transnet, sabotaged the GdL's (Union of Train Drivers) strike for higher wages mainly because he feared a delay in the company's start on the stock exchange, from which he hoped to profit.

Cooperation between the trade unions and businesses will form the basis for the next round of cost-cutting measures, threatening the S-Bahn workers and all other railway employees. Rüdiger Grube, the new DB executive board chairman, former Daimler manager, and Hartmut Mehdorn's successor this spring, artfully exploited the media to apologise for the problems currently disrupting the Berlin S-Bahn when he met with Klaus Wowereit (SPD), the incumbent city mayor, at a "railway summit gathering" last Monday. Nevertheless, he failed to confirm any concrete plans regarding subsidies. On June 2, *Die Welt* newspaper reported that Grube wants to again take up the controversial plans for privatisation, possibly next year. At the same time, he announced a €2 billion austerity programme for DB, including almost €1 billion in freight traffic, and invited the trade unions to talks about a fresh round of staff cuts and wage concessions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact