

German unions prepare betrayal of rail workers

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5 November 2010

Last week, some 1,700 rail workers took part in warning strikes across Germany. From the outset, however, the unions, Transnet and GDBA, were opposed to any serious struggle. Instead the temporary strikes and protest actions served as a cover for the union officials' collaboration with Deutsche Bahn AG management.

In addition, Transnet and GDBA sought to exclude the Train Drivers Union (GDL). Two years ago, Transnet and GDBA conspired with Deutsche Bahn (DB) against the GDL and did everything to sabotage the strike by train drivers for higher wages and better working conditions.

Since then, many union members switched to the GDL. Now, Transnet and GDBA are delivering an ultimatum to the GDL officials: either join in a collective sellout agreement or face isolation again. Meanwhile, Transnet and GDBA have agreed to merge their organizations.

In July this year the two unions began to negotiate contracts separately with DB and the private railway companies. These talks have centred on the demand for a national sector collective agreement, and means employees of DB and the private railways would get a uniform basic wage. The private railways were created in the 1990s during the so-called railway reform, i.e., the privatization of rail transport. Both unions supported the privatization and thus created the division in salaries about which they are now complaining. For years, Transnet and GDBA have entered agreements sanctioning up to 30 percent lower wages for workers at the private rail companies.

Since August, the GDL has also been involved in the negotiations. It has insisted on negotiating independently and in order to maintain credibility among its members it has thus far has not accepted the

proposed settlement.

There are strong indications the planned agreement would set a standard basic wage that would continue to undermine the living standards of the majority of workers. The low wages in the private rail companies are likely to become the standard pay of DB employees. In addition, allowances are being negotiated that will completely fragment the workforce and hand management virtually unlimited flexibility.

Deutsche Bahn makes no bones about the fact that it would welcome a sector-wide agreement because it would provide more "competitive" opportunities for the expansion of new lines and networks.

The private railways have long opposed a unified wage structure. "If we give up this advantage, competition is dead," lamented Hans-Peter Ackman, head of the Employers Association AGVDE, which includes 120 train and bus companies. But the six largest companies—Veolia, Arriva, Abellio, Keolis, Hesse State Railways and Benex—have now broken away and have begun their own negotiations for a sector-wide agreement for their 10,000 employees.

The private railway companies speak openly about an equalization of wages towards a "minimum level" and demand regional differences in pay. Over the past week, they have made a "final offer" that would fix the wages of their employees at about 90 percent of the DB level. Although Transnet and GDBA have shown that the offer is 20 percent below pay levels at Deutsche Bahn, they have agreed with DB management to participate in binding arbitration talks.

A planned meeting last Friday to prepare such arbitration was cancelled when the GDL refused to participate. "Bargaining has reached a stage that does not require arbitration," said GDL chief Claus Weselsky, suggesting it would be necessary only if an

impasse had been reached.

The spokesperson of the six private railway companies, Christoph Kreienbaum, said, “We want an arbitration outcome that applies to us and Deutsche Bahn, on the one hand, and the Joint Negotiating Commission of Transnet and GDBA, as well as the GDL, on the other.” For the private railways, a meeting just with Deutsche Bahn, Transnet and GDBA is out of the question. “We don’t want to wait three months to go into binding arbitration with the GDL when this is already possible”, said Kreienbaum. On the other hand, without the GDL it would also not be possible to coordinate things with Deutsche Bahn.

So far, the GDL has refused to join in the collective bargaining effort. But their differences are purely tactical. The union currently benefits from the opposition of many Transnet and GDBA members who oppose the wage-cutting policy of their own unions. But it has no perspective or intention to conduct a serious struggle for the interests of rail workers. Two years ago, when the train drivers’ strike developed into a confrontation with the government, the GDL quickly ended the struggle and accepted a rotten compromise.

Like their counterparts throughout the world, the German trade unions play a key role in suppressing the class struggle and facilitating the attack on living standards, opening the door for the employers to launch new and harsher attacks.

In Lower Saxony, 280 workers at machine manufacturer’s Atlas Ganderkesee plant have been on strike since October 22 against the tearing up of their contract by new owner Fil Filipov, who has refused to negotiate a new contract proposed by the IG Metall union. Although Filipov wants to increase working hours and cut wages and is threatening to outsource operations, IG Metall and the works council want to wait until November 7 to decide whether the company’s two other plants in Delmenhorst and Vechta should be called out on strike.

The deputy chairman of IG Metall complained last week during a demonstration outside the strikebound factory, “This is class war from above.” He pleaded with the owner: “Overcome your fears and sign a collective agreement that gives security to the 650 employees at the three plants, Mr. Filipov.”



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