

Train drivers strike in Germany

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A two hour nationwide strike by train drivers on Tuesday brought most of the morning rush hour rail transport in Germany to a standstill. Particularly affected were the Rhine-Main region and Stuttgart. Also hit by the action was the city of Dresden in East Germany and the Berlin city train system.

The chairman of the German train drivers union (GDL), Claus Weselsky, announced more strikes if the management of German Rail (Deutsche Bahn, DB) refuses to present a better contract and continued to deny a unified labour contract to the country's six major private railway companies, the so-called G6 (Abellio, Arriva, Benex, Keolis, Veolia and Hessian State Railways).

Parallel to the strikes, the GDL has initiated a strike ballot among its members and threatened a nationwide indefinite strike by train drivers.

The GDL is demanding a national contract agreement for all 26,000 drivers employed on mainline, metro and freight railways based on a minimum income guaranteed by Deutsche Bahn. According to the union, wages for private railway workers are on average nearly 30 percent below the average DB level. In addition, working and social conditions are significantly worse and rest periods are shorter for those employed on private railways.

The GDL is calling for a "federal drivers contract" which consists of five key objectives: a five percent wage increase based on the existing DB train drivers contract, continued employment on equal terms following any change of employer, a uniform working week of 38 hours, minimum qualification standards for drivers, and protection for drivers who are rendered incapable of continuing to drive a train.

The GDL is demanding an end to the current practice of wage dumping by private rail companies. The union cites statistics that show that the burden for train drivers employed by private companies has had repercussions

for the safety of DB workers and passengers. This conclusion is underlined by recent figures from the Federal Railway Authority (EBA). In 2009, train drivers failed to respond to red danger signals on no less than 355 occasions in Germany, and drivers of private railway companies went through three times as many red stop signals as those employed by Deutsche Bahn.

Drivers confront not only the resistance of the rail companies, they also face isolation and opposition from other trade unions.

Memories are still fresh of the strike-breaking role of the two rival rail unions, Transnet and GDBA, during the last strike by GDL drivers in 2007/2008. For his dubious role during the strike, the chairman of Transnet, Norbert Hansen, was rewarded with the post of personnel manager on the DB board with an average monthly salary of €33,000.

Transnet and GDBA merged last November to become the EVG (Railway and Transport Union).

Even before the latest strike, the EVG leadership warned management against making any concessions to the GDL. "There will be far-reaching consequences if the employers agree a contract with the GDL which is better than ours," EVG president Alexander Kirchner told the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel*.

His union would then call for renegotiations to obtain the same conditions. "On top of that the unified contractual procedures will be history, and we can no longer be expected to hold the fort based on our policies," Kirchner added.

The policy with which the EVG chairman "holds the fort" is a straitjacket aimed at suffocating any independent movement of workers. Instead of utilising the train drivers' power and readiness to strike to improve wages and working conditions for all employees, Kirchner is seeking the opposite. The much vaunted EVG "unified contract" is aimed at cutting

wages and benefits in close cooperation with the rail companies and the government.

Kirchner referred to an agreement struck by the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) last summer with the employers' president Dieter Hundt. In a joint commission, the trade unions and employers drew up the framework for a "unified contract".

The bill declares that only one contract agreement can apply in a single company. "If there are several contract agreements by different trade unions in a company, then the valid contract is that agreed by the majority union with the most members in the company", declared DGB Chairman Michael Sommer last June.

This agreement is now being employed to force train drivers to their knees. Following the failure to prevent the GDL action three years ago after several attempts to legally ban the strike, the DGB is now taking on the task of incapacitating a trade union with a militant reputation. EVG head Kirchner is advising DB and the G6-companies how to proceed against the GDL.

Kirchner has proposed that the DB should agree to negotiate with the GDL train drivers only if representatives of the G6 companies take part in the talks. In January, he agreed to a specific contract with the six private companies for train conductors which he also declared to be binding for train drivers. Then the rail companies blocked negotiations with the GDL, resulting in a collapse of talks in early February.

Now Kirchner is arguing that the strike by the GDL is absurd because it is directed against companies that have already signed a contract agreement.

Some media outlets have eagerly adopted this line of argument. Under the headline "Absurd Strike, Absurd Arguments," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote on Tuesday that the strike by the GDL was "utterly incomprehensible." It was "even absurd and downright dangerous for the GDL because it was arousing enemies in the government." Since the Federal Labour Court ruled last summer against more than one contract within a single company, "experts are now discussing whether a law is needed to avoid chaos."

The political situation has changed significantly in the three years since the last train drivers strike. Following its massive bailouts to support banks and speculators, the government is determined to implement drastic welfare cuts. The government, trade unions and the media are seeking to suppress any

workers' struggle that could ignite broader resistance against the government's anti-social policies.

In this conflict, the drivers cannot rely on the GDL, which is neither willing nor capable of leading such a fight. The GDL represents very narrow and specific sectional interests and is desperate to avoid any political conflict with the government. This is clear from the fact that the head of the GDL, Claus Weselsky, is a member of the conservative Christian democratic Union (CDU) and has frequently supported Transport Minister Peter Ramsauer (CSU).

In the course of its months-long labour dispute three years ago, the GDL was able to win considerable popular support but nevertheless capitulated to political pressure at the last moment and broke off the strike on the basis of a rotten compromise.

In order to win their legitimate claims, train drivers must link up with other sections of the working class to build a broad front against wage and welfare cuts. This, however, requires a fundamentally new political strategy centred on the needs of working people instead of the profit interests of big business. Production in general and major companies such as the railways have to be wrested from the control of the financial aristocracy and placed in the service of society as a whole.

This can be achieved only if workers break with their old, nationalist organizations and join together to fight for a socialist reorganization of society in Europe and all over the world.



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