

German train drivers extend strike

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The German train drivers' union, the GDL, extended its strike action Wednesday. Following three lightning strikes in passenger transport, the GDL declared at a Monday press conference in Frankfurt-Main that it would broaden its efforts to include freight transport.

GDL chief Claus Weselsky told the media that the results of a strike ballot found that 92 percent of GDL members employed by German Rail (Deutsche Bahn, DB) and 96 percent of its members employed by private rail companies voted in favor of further industrial action and an open-ended strike.

The result was higher than the union bureaucracy had anticipated. Drivers employed by private companies earn up to 30 percent less than their colleagues at DB. Their anger and readiness to take militant action was clearly expressed in the ballot.

"The situation is serious," Weselsky said and called upon the employers to "finally submit a negotiable offer." At the same time he rejected "for the time being" an offer of arbitration from the former SPD party leader and defense minister, Peter Struck. One day earlier Struck had offered his services as a mediator in the wage dispute.

A strike by train drivers in the transport network could have a considerable impact on broad sections of industry. The steel industry, in particular, is one of the main customers of rail freight. The auto industry is also dependent on rail transport for auto parts and the shipment of its products to North Sea ports such as Emden for export.

The GDL is demanding a new national contract for all of the 26,000 drivers employed in main line, metro and freight railways that would guarantee a minimum income based on the level of wages paid by the

Deutsche Bahn. The union is also asking for a five percent wage increase based on the current DB drivers' contract.

According to the GDL, a DB train driver currently earns on average €2,700 (gross) per month. This means that despite the fact that they carry out demanding and highly responsible work, these employees make much less than the average earnings of industrial workers (€3,237 per month). Wages for drivers on private railways average just under €1,900 per month, an unacceptable sum, the GDL says. Working conditions, rest periods and social safeguards are also significantly worse in private rail companies.

In addition to the wage demand, the GDL is calling for a guarantee that the contract will be observed in the event of any change of employer, a uniform workweek of 38 hours, minimum qualification standards for drivers, and protection for workers who are rendered incapable of continuing to drive a train.

The train drivers face a wave of opposition to their demands from employer associations, the government, much of the media and, of particular significance, the German Trade Union Federation (DGB).

Transport Minister Peter Ramsauer described the GDL demands as completely exaggerated and called upon the union to exercise "moderation". The leading private rail company in Germany, Veolia Transport, announced it would take legal action. "We are considering our options, whether the public interest is at risk and what legal means we could take against the strike," CEO, Ragnar Nordström told the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*.

In the *Bild* newspaper the president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA), Dieter Hundt called for restrictions to be

imposed on the right to strike. “Non-craft unions should not be allowed to strike as long as there is a contract applicable to most union members in a company,” Hundt said.

The BDA president then received the backing of the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer. In the same edition of *Bild*, Sommer attacked the GDL, declaring that “it had completely renounced any claim upon the solidarity and cooperation of the unions.” The GDL demands were divisive and selfish, according to Sommer. What the train drivers gain “will be at the expense of all other railway workers,” Sommer said, clearly trying to divide railway workers and incite opposition to the train drivers.

Together with Hundt, Sommer called upon the German government to introduce a law that makes a single contract binding for all employees in a company. Such a measure is aimed at so-called non craft unions such as the GDL, the pilots’ union, Cockpit and the medical workers’ union, Marburger Bund. If implemented, it would amount to destruction of these unions.

There are many indications that the drivers’ strike could quickly develop into a power struggle with the government in which the DGB would be clearly lined up with the latter against the workers.

The GDL leadership is entirely unprepared for such a struggle. As the representative of a profession in which a strike by a relative few can have broad repercussions, the GDL leaders hope they can achieve more concessions than other unions without directly challenging the capitalist system. This stance, however, completely underestimates the scale of the economic crisis and the determination of the employer associations, the government and DGB to defend the capitalist profit system.

Three years ago, train drivers also conducted a months-long labor dispute and received much popular support. In the event, the GDL leadership caved in to political pressure at a crucial moment and suffocated the strike on the basis of a lousy compromise.

The current strike once again raises fundamental political questions for train drivers. In order to achieve their legitimate claims, train drivers must break with their established union and link up with other sections of the working class to organize a broad resistance against wage and welfare cuts.

This requires, however, a political strategy that is opposed to the logic of the capitalist profit system, which places profit margins above the needs of working people. Major companies such as the railways must be wrested from the control of the financial aristocracy and placed at the service of society as a whole. This requires a new perspective and can only be achieved by workers breaking with their old, national organizations and joining together in Europe and worldwide in the struggle for a socialist reorganization of society.



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