

Rail transport chaos in major German city

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The privatisation of Deutsche Bahn, the German national railroad company, is having a harmful impact on the safety of travellers in the German city of Mainz.

Each evening, for almost two weeks, the central railway station in Mainz has become a “ghost station.” No inter-city services stop at the station, long-distance trains have been redirected to avoid the city, and even regional services and trams have been drastically limited.

According to official explanations, there is a sudden shortage of signal controllers due to illness and holidays. But the real reason for the slowdown is the ruthless cost-cutting policies that Deutsche Bahn has pursued for decades against workers, above all since the company commenced plans to make public stock offerings.

The decision of the board of Deutsche Bahn to effectively shut down the train station in Mainz has had a drastic impact on hundreds of thousands of people. Commuters cannot get to work, pupils are unable to get to school and return home, and travellers have been left stranded.

At first, the company refused to recognise the problem. No information was provided for two days, even as the train station in Mainz came to a standstill. The company then stated that the situation would return to normal after a few days. But last weekend, company representatives said that a return to normality before the end of August was not expected.

On Monday, the situation worsened once again. Long-distance trains are now being redirected around Mainz during the day, and local transport is at times either non-existent or operating sharply reduced services.

The impact of the crisis is being felt across the whole Rhine-Main region. The capital of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, Mainz is an important hub for rail traffic, and on August 19, the school year begins in the state and in neighboring Hessen.

Angry and disgusted travellers expressed their views on the public broadcaster ARD’s “Brennpunkt.” One passenger described the situation as “a total catastrophe.” Another added that “in a highly civilised country, this sort of thing is absolutely unacceptable.”

Leading officials in the Deutsche Bahn have stated that there is no quick solution to the problem. They have claimed that the controllers, who operate the points from the signal box and maintain the safe running of rail traffic, cannot be replaced overnight. A signal operator changing from Cologne to Mainz would need at least three months to become familiar with the running of the tracks, the points, and the local schedule.

In reality, the acute shortage of workers has been the norm for years. A decision was made in 2002 to drastically cut jobs. Hartmud Mehdorn, who was chairman of Deutsch Bahn at the time, pursued the goal of privatisation and prepared the company for the stock market. This plan included more than 20,000 signal operator job cuts between 2002 and 2012. During that time, the total number of signal operators was reduced from 52,000 to 35,000.

Since 2002, massive cuts have been made to the workforce in order to increase investor profits. By the end of Mehdorn’s term in 2009, the number of total employees had fallen from 340,000 to 240,000 and thereafter fell further to 190,000.

Across the country, thousands of signal controllers need to be hired. There are also shortages of train drivers, conductors, mechanics and other staff. According to figures from the rail union IVG, the 190,000 workers employed by the company have worked a total of 8 million overtime hours and have lost out on 9 million hours of holidays. Last year alone, signal operators were absent for 60,000 shifts.

Deutsche Bahn, which operates legally as a private company, is currently compelled to give profits of €500 million to the state—its sole owner. This maintains a

constant pressure for further cuts to the workforce. Although the goal of rapidly entering the stock market has been temporarily postponed, company and government officials plan to deepen privatisation efforts.

The reduction of staff to boost profits has been the stated policy for decades, not only of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP), but also of the SPD and Greens.

The trade unions have also supported this strategy by selling out their members. In 2011, when striking train drivers and transport workers in Berlin sought to fight for better conditions, they were betrayed by both the IVG, which is affiliated to the German trade union council (DGB), and the GDL, which represents train drivers.

Across Europe, privatisations have led to safety reductions and have devastated important social infrastructure. The privatisation of the railways in Britain begun under Margaret Thatcher, for example, resulted in the closure of vast sectors of the rail network, increased travel costs and led to an increase in train disasters.

Such dangers are already being felt in Mainz. It is believed that a near collision on August 1 between two trams was caused by an error in operating the signal points for which a lack of workers was to blame. At the time only two signal operators—not the required three—were present in the signal tower.

After a crisis meeting on Tuesday, company officials stated that a remedy would be found quickly. Leading company officials, however, have made clear that no changes will be made.

Volker Kefer, a representative on the board of Deutsche Bahn, defended the company's job destruction programme in a recent television appearance: "We have invested heavily in new signaling technology, which means we don't need so many people in the signal boxes."

Another company representative admitted that "there are similarly critical situations like that in Mainz elsewhere." In other words, what is today happening in Mainz could take place across Germany tomorrow.

As a consequence of the events in Mainz, Rainer Brüderle, the head of the FDP in parliament, demanded the full privatisation of the railway in an interview with

the *Mainzer Allgemeine Zeitung*. The entire ruling class agrees that the working population must pay for the failures of the privatisation. According to Brüderle, workers will have to accept that they no longer have any right to basic social provisions.



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