

German EVG rail union takes on management role to deal with transport chaos

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For days, the central rail station in the German city of Mainz (population 200,000) has been cut off from the rest of the country's rail network due to a lack of signal controllers. Deutsche Bahn (DB), Germany's railway company, has now responded to the transport crisis by integrating the EVG (rail and transport) union into the company's human resources department as a co-manager. The long-term cooperation between the company's board of directors and the union has undergone a qualitative change and is directed entirely against the interests of the workforce.

Ulrich Weber, the head of Deutsche Bahn's human resources department, met with leading EVG officials on Wednesday evening in Frankfurt. It was agreed that the union, together with its works councils and the human resources department, would carry out a thorough examination of the company's affairs. This will apply not only to signalling operations, where the unions claim there is a shortage of 1,000 controllers, but to all of Deutsche Bahn's business activities.

The breakdown of rail services in Mainz has put the rail company unflatteringly in the national headlines. The population has reacted with anger and disbelief at the comprehensive failure of public transport, whose impact was felt in the whole Rhine-Main region (an area with 5.8 million people).

The vast majority of long-distance services are being redirected around Mainz throughout the day, while regional transport and tram services are severely limited. Previously, no long-distance trains were stopping in Mainz after 8 p.m.

The reason for the chaos is an acute shortage of signal operators. Due to holidays and illness, half of the crew are currently absent. Deutsche Bahn officials have admitted that the situation is just as precarious at other locations and that the debacle in Mainz could be

repeated at any time. Trains have already been cancelled in the towns of Bebra and Zwickau because of a lack of signal controllers.

According to EVG chief Alexander Kirchner, Mainz is only "the tip of the iceberg." Across the company, a shortage of staff has led to 8 million hours of overtime worked and 9 million hours of outstanding holidays that have not been taken.

The shortage of workers is a consequence of the privatisation drive throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Deutsche Bahn was transformed into a profit-driven company to be floated on the stock market under the leadership of chairman Hartmut Mehdorn. This failed in 2008 due to the onset of the global economic crisis.

As part of the transformation of Deutsche Bahn from a public service to a profitable private company, the workforce was reduced between 1994 and 2010 by 150,000 employees. The company's department covering the rail network, which includes the signal boxes, was reduced from 54,000 workers in 2001 to 35,000 in 2012.

Thanks to the job cuts, Deutsche Bahn's network operations achieved a large profit that was transferred to the main company. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper, Deutsche Bahn anticipates returns of 20 percent over the next five years, and the trend is to increase. The government, which is the sole owner of the company, demands annual returns of €500 million. By 2014, the company must increase this even further to €700 million.

The union officials and Social Democratic Party (SPD) politicians who now complain of excessive job cuts were all enthusiastic promoters of privatisation before plans to offer shares in the company were shelved in 2008.

The department of railways and the network regulator

have instructed Deutsche Bahn “to promptly comply with operational requirements for rail transport and to make available personnel for the signal box in Mainz who are sufficiently qualified.” Otherwise, Deutsche Bahn faces a fine of up to €250,000.

However, there is no quick solution. Signal controllers, who ensure the safe running of the trains by operating the points from the signal box, cannot be replaced overnight. For example, a signal operator transferring to work in Mainz from Cologne would require at least three months until he was fully familiarised with the tracks, signal points and the local schedule. Regular train services are not expected to be restored in Mainz until September, provided no more signal operators are absent due to illness.

The integration of the EGV union into the company’s human resources management is aimed at helping the firm out of the crisis, without endangering the high rates of return being achieved by Deutsche Bahn’s network operations and the transfer of profits to the state.

It remains unclear if new workers will be hired. Measures are being discussed in regard to the signalling operations that would increase the burdens on signal controllers. They are to be trained at other signal boxes near their places of work so they could be deployed with increased flexibility and effectiveness. Such measures would be easier to impose with the collaboration of the trade unions.

The EVG is well suited to play a co-management role. Previously known as Transnet, the union operated for years as an arm of management under its leader Norbert Hansen. In the 2000s, the union was one of the strongest supporters of a public offering of shares in the rail company. Hansen was rewarded for this with a post as personnel chief on the board of directors in 2008, with a *monthly* salary of €150,000 [\$US 200,000]!

Lothar Krauß, Hansen’s interim successor as the union’s chairman, defended Hansen’s integration into the company’s management as “part of the German culture of consensus.” Krauß declared that he viewed it as “perfectly OK” and was proud that a union official would be taking over the responsibilities of an employment director.

One year earlier, Transnet had acted as an openly strike-breaking organisation for Deutsche Bahn. It worked to betray a strike by train drivers, denouncing

the GDL train drivers’ union, and openly supporting management. The union even went so far as to take legal action, together with the board of directors, against the GDL. The same union also cooperated fully with the slashing of jobs to prepare DB’s launch on the stock market.



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