

# German train drivers union to hold warning strike Tuesday

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Last Friday, the pilots' union Cockpit (VC) organized another six-hour strike against Lufthansa, affecting all short and medium haul flights landing or taking off from Frankfurt airport between 5 and 11 p.m. This was the second pilots' strike in their ongoing labour dispute, following a strike the week before at the Lufthansa subsidiary German Wings.

On Friday afternoon, the train drivers' union GDL announced a further strike for this Tuesday. "We are calling out all on-board staff and train drivers in passenger and freight traffic to participate in a nationwide warning strike," GDL leader Claus Weselsky told the broadcaster *Hessischer Rundfunk*. The GDL held an initial three-hour warning strike from 6 p.m. on Monday of last week.

At the same time, the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) and the government announced the adoption of legal barriers against the growing readiness to strike by pilots, train drivers and many other workers.

The pilots are fighting back against a deterioration in their retirement provisions. The train drivers' union is calling for a salary increase of 5 percent and a reduction in the 39-hour week by two hours.

The moderate demands of the pilots and train drivers are more than justified, after they have faced years of non-stop attacks. Between 2002 and 2012, the workforce on the railways has been reduced from 350,000 to 190,000, resulting in those left behind being forced to work constant overtime. Last year alone, railway workers put in almost 8 million overtime hours.

Nevertheless, the media are ranting about the GDL and Cockpit. The vehement attacks by big business, politicians and the media on these small unions are not because of the strikes. The GDL and Cockpit have kept the strikes very limited and announced them well in advance, making the effects easily manageable. Last Friday's strike by the pilots affected only some 200 flights. According to the Deutsche Bahn railway

company, the three-hour strike by train drivers on Monday only affected about 150 passenger trains with cancellations or delays. In freight, about 50 trains were affected. In comparison, the constant job cuts on the railroads last year meant that the Mainz Railway Station could not be used for weeks, having a wide impact on rail traffic throughout the entire Rhine-Main area.

In reality, the attacks against the train drivers and pilots are being used to intimidate all workers who want to resist the constant attacks on working conditions. The fundamental right to strike is being attacked. In the media the strikes are portrayed as a form of blackmail and the striking workers are being criminalized.

For several years, the corporations and their representatives in politics and the media, together with the DGB, have demanded that the major unions should have a monopoly on representing the workforce in negotiations (so-called "negotiating uniformity"). Accordingly, only the union with the most members in a company should have the right to negotiate with the employers. This would ensure the larger DGB unions have a monopoly of power, making the smaller unions such as GDL, Cockpit, UFO (air traffic controllers) and Marburger Bund (doctors) practically superfluous.

Given the fact that the DGB and its member unions work closely with big business and the government, this represents the de facto abolition of the right to strike. All those workers who oppose the co-management role of the DGB unions would lose their right to strike.

This clearly contradicts the constitutionally enshrined right to strike. Article 9, paragraph 3 of the constitution expressly grants everyone the right "to safeguard and improve working and economic conditions, and to form associations", which in turn have the right "to conduct labour disputes".

According to a report in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* last week, Minister of Labour Andrea Nahles (Social

Democratic Party, SPD) will present a draft law in the autumn imposing “negotiating uniformity”. In the future, the contract negotiated by the union with the most members in a given company would hold sway, the newspaper learned from government circles.

This legislative initiative was also a topic of discussion last week at a meeting of government representatives with the employers associations and trade unions at Schloss Meseberg. Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) said afterwards there had been progress. “We have come a whole lot closer,” she said. The details of the bill are not yet known.

There are plans being drawn up by the employers associations and their lawyers to circumvent the necessity for a constitutional amendment. Consideration is being given to requiring unions to announce strikes early or undertake mandatory conciliation procedures before strikes can happen. In the end, all the proposals boil down to the fact that the state would determine how and when a strike could take place.

The head of the DGB, Reiner Hoffmann, who attended the meeting in Meseburg, said there would be more detailed discussions between the unions and the government in the next two weeks. Hoffmann signaled his approval of the new law, like most of the DGB unions.

More than four years ago, his predecessor as DGB leader, Michael Sommer, together with the main employers representative at the time, Dieter Hundt, had presented a joint bill on “negotiating uniformity”. This draft stipulated that only one collective agreement could apply in a workplace. “Industrial action was excluded during the term of the collective agreement of the majority union”, he underlined at the time. Sommer wanted to nullify the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of association without needing a constitutional amendment, by ensuring that smaller unions could only negotiate contracts for their members, such as train drivers, if the relevant DGB union and the employers agreed in advance.

In the current dispute, the Deutsche Bahn (DB) is already demanding that the GDL accept “negotiating uniformity” and enter into a cooperation agreement with the majority Railway and Transport Union (EVG). This would mean the GDL effectively submits to the larger DGB trade union.

The EVG is the successor to the Transnet and GdED unions, and has collaborated closely with the DB management in pushing through massive job losses. The EVG supports the employers in keeping the GDL out of

the negotiations.

It was this role of the EVG as an extension of railway management that enabled the GDL to grow in strength in the first place. Although the EVG is still the majority trade union on the railways, this is above all due to its members in the area of infrastructure. On the trains, the GDL has significantly more members, organizing 80 percent of drivers and 30 percent of on-board staff.

Despite fierce confrontations, the GDL and EVG do not fundamentally differ. The GDL is part of the German Civil Service Federation (dbb), and its chairman Claus Weselsky is not only a member of the dbb board, but also the CDU.

Weselsky and the GDL differ from the EVG only in the fact that they want to sell their services more expensively and to appear less corrupt. The differences are purely tactical. The GDL shares the objective of Deutsche Bahn, which is that of maximizing profits at the expense of the employees. The attacks on railway workers are a result of privatization and pan-European and global competition. It is the workers who are systematically being made to pay for this competition. The limited national perspective of the GDL—applying a little more pressure on the company than the EVG—cannot oppose these global developments.

The introduction of “negotiating uniformity” is not just directed against unions such as the GDL, Cockpit, UFO or the Marburger Bund. Rather, the legislative initiative aims to nip in the bud any truly independent movement against the attacks of the employers and the austerity program of the government. The growth of the smaller unions is only a distorted expression of the anger building up in the working class against these assaults.

The attack on the right to strike makes clear that any struggle to defend workers’ rights and achievements raises fundamental questions of political perspective. This requires the building of an international party based on a socialist program.



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