

Germany: Union leader condemns train drivers' strike

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Faced with new strikes by railway workers and pilots, the new chairman of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Reiner Hoffmann, has demonstratively sided with corporate management, politicians and a media that has been agitating against the strikers for days.

Last Saturday, train drivers and on-board staff took strike action for the second time to support their demands for a 5 percent wage increase and a two-hour reduction in working time to 37 hours per week. Lufthansa pilots stopped work again to defend their early retirement scheme. They went on strike for six hours last Friday at Frankfurt Airport and for eight hours this Wednesday at Munich Airport.

From the start, the industrial action by the smaller sectoral unions, GDL (German Train Drivers' Union) and the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) representing pilots, has faced a coordinated smear campaign by rail company Deutsche Bahn (DB) and Lufthansa, members of the government and the media. Last Monday, the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* printed a furious attack by business editor Corinna Budras, who wrote that train drivers and pilots had "exceeded the boundaries of good taste with their simultaneous walkout."

This chorus has now been joined by the new DGB chairman, Reiner Hoffmann.

In a letter to Klaus Dauderstädt, the chairman of the umbrella organisation DBB Civil Service Officials Association, which also includes the GDL, Hoffmann demanded he bring the GDL "to heel." This was reported by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last Saturday, which claimed to have a copy of the DGB leader's letter.

Hoffmann complained that the strikes would lead to a loss of image for the unions. "The aggressive

demarcation dispute and conflict course of the GDL is... not compatible with a solidarity of interests of all workers." The GDL was refusing all offers of cooperation by the DGB member Railway and Transport Union (EVG), and wanted to "expand its own sphere of influence without regard to a loss of public image by the German trade unions as a whole." Instead, what was needed in the current collective bargaining was "constructive cooperation." This was the only way "to satisfy the interests of millions of rail customers."

"If further reputational damage for the unions is to be averted, I think it is high time that you...exert a moderating influence on the GDL," Hoffmann demanded.

Hoffmann, who succeeded Michael Sommer as DGB leader in May, is the personification of the "social partnership" of the German trade unions. As his letter makes clear, this means collaboration with the corporations against the workforce. For a long time, strikes have no longer fit with the image of the DGB leadership.

However, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted, the letter does not follow the usual conventions in contract negotiations. Previously, the trade union umbrella organisation had left the attacks on the smaller sectoral unions to its affiliated members, at least officially, as during the train drivers' strike by GDL members in 2008.

Hoffmann's letter to the DBB leader is linked to a move to establish so-called negotiating uniformity through new legislation introduced by Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD, Social Democratic Party) this autumn. This law will establish the principle that in each company, only the union with the largest membership can conduct contract negotiations. Smaller

unions would thus no longer be recognised as negotiating partners, and future strikes organised by them would be illegal.

In this context, Hoffmann's letter to the DBB sounds more like a threat: The strikes by GDL train drivers would strengthen the employers' side, he asserts, which regards the new law primarily as a means of imposing "industrial peace." In other words, the strikers are responsible if the right to strike is restricted more generally.

In truth, the DGB and its member unions have for years been pushing for so-called negotiating uniformity, and accept the accompanying obligation to maintain "industrial peace"—i.e., a no-strike clause. They are trying to push back their opponents in the sectoral unions, above all to suppress any struggle by workers independent of the DGB bureaucracy.

Hoffmann demonstratively supports the EVG in its attempt to exclude the GDL. The GDL has won many members among train drivers in recent years because the larger railway union EVG and its predecessor Transnet have acted as an extension of the Deutsche Bahn management and stabbed the strike by train drivers in 2008 in the back. The former Transnet union chairman Norbert Hansen was rewarded with a post in DB management, where he received a monthly salary of €150,000 and million-dollar bonuses.

The chairman of the DB Group Works Council, Jens Schwarz of the EVG, attacked the striking GDL drivers, accusing them of splitting the workforce. Having various collective agreements means the workers cannot be treated equally, he told the news agency *DPA* on Monday.

What is to be made of the "equal treatment" of workers on the railway can be seen by the fact that the service sector union Verdi, a DGB member, has for years agreed to various low-wage contracts for the 20,000 employees in the DB logistics subsidiary Schenker and at the long-distance bus and local transport companies belonging to Deutsche Bahn. These include company-wide agreements, and various regional agreements for the transport and logistics industries. For these workers, Verdi has accepted contracts that are significantly worse, in terms of lower wages and working hours and conditions, than in the rest of the group.

This is the true core of Hoffmann's "constructive

dialogue": dividing the workers to enforce attacks against them, and so to boost the profits of Deutsche Bahn.

However, the GDL itself does not take a principled position. It poses as being more militant. For example, GDL leader Claus Weselsky threatened a ballot and subsequent indefinite strike if Deutsche Bahn does not "finally make a substantial offer for improved working conditions."

However, it has the same limited pro-capitalist and national perspective as the DGB. This makes it unable to fight back against increasing privatisation and the impact of global competition in air and rail transport, which lead to increasingly devastating attacks on workers. This requires a common, Europe-wide struggle by all transport workers, directed against the profit interests of the airlines and rail companies. Such a struggle is rejected equally by the GDL and the DGB.



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