

German train drivers vote to strike

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Last Thursday, the train drivers union GDL announced that 91 percent of its members had voted to take unlimited strike action.

Following several warning strikes at the beginning of September, the industrial dispute at Deutsche Bahn (DB) has reached a new stage. Last week, the GDL declared that negotiations had broken down. They are demanding a 5 percent wage increase and a reduction in the working week by two hours. In the future, the union wants to represent conductors, onboard catering staff, apprentices, and dispatchers, as well as drivers. These occupational groups were solely represented by the Rail and Transport Union (EVG) as part of a so-called “foundation contract” that expired at the end of June.

At the same time, the industrial dispute by Lufthansa pilots is also intensifying. Despite several warning strikes, Lufthansa is in conflict with the pilots’ union Cockpit (VC), which is defending the existing early retirement system.

The demands of the train drivers and pilots are completely justified. For several years, workers in these transport concerns have faced unrelenting attacks. Deutsche Bahn cut its workforce from 350,000 to 190,000 between 2002 and 2012, leading to constant overtime working. Rail employees worked almost 8 million hours of overtime last year.

However, the industrial disputes on the rail and in the air involve far more than just wage rises, pension security, and a reduction in working times.

In close collaboration with the employers’ associations and the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB), the government is preparing a massive attack on the right to strike. At the core of this strategy is a new law on so-called “unified contract negotiations”, under which only the union with the majority of members in an enterprise would retain the right to negotiate. This would give the monopoly of power to those unions belonging to the DGB, pulling the rug from under smaller unions like the GDL, Cockpit, UFO (air traffic controllers), and the Marburger Bund (doctors).

Given that the DGB and its affiliated unions collaborate closely with the employers and government, this means the de facto abolition of the right to strike. Industrial action by workers who reject the co-management policies of the DGB unions would then be illegal.

This breaches the constitutionally enshrined right to strike. Nevertheless, Labour Minister Andreas Nahle (SPD, Social Democratic Party) intends to present a law on unified contract negotiations in just a few weeks. She is working closely with DGB leader Reiner Hoffmann. As demanded by the employers’ associations and the DGB, the new law proposes that in future, only the union with majority representation will be able to negotiate contracts.

In the present dispute, the state-owned Deutsche Bahn is attempting to set an example. The DB supervisory board includes senior civil servants and EVG chairman Alexander Kirchner and his deputy Klaus Dieter Hommel. The company is insisting that the GDL already recognise “contract unity” and conclude a cooperation agreement with the EVG, which would be tantamount to subordinating its independence to the DGB union.

The EVG is the successor to the unions Transnet and GdED, and has collaborated with DB in pushing through massive job cuts in previous years. It supports the rail employers in the industrial dispute with the GDL.

In an interview last week with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, GDL leader Claus Weselsky said the strike had been deliberately provoked by management. He added, “Moreover, this was at the same time as the pilots [dispute] at Lufthansa”. In five rounds of negotiations, DB has refused to recognise the demands of the GDL, let alone negotiate.

Everyone can see what is being done here, Weselsky said. “These two occupational groups are to provide the justification for the planned, but disputed, law on contract unity—with which occupational unions are to be forced to submit to the contract negotiated by the larger sectoral unions”.

One day before the announcement of the strike ballot, DB lead negotiator Werner Bayreuther attacked GDL

leader Weselsky in an “open letter”, which was also provided to the media. In it, the former judge and business consultant raises serious accusations against Weselsky, accusing him of aggravating the situation and now finding himself “in a dead end”.

Bayreuther said that Weslesky had no interest in conducting genuine negotiations. Instead, he was conducting a struggle against Deutsche Bahn and the EVG in order to win more members among the workforce. “It is not acceptable that the train drivers put the cart before the horse in our business, to force the expansion [in members] they have sought for years inside the company”, writes Beyreuther.

He concludes with a “last offer”, which can only be described as a provocation. Under the terms of this, negotiations would be suspended until the new law on “contractual unity” is ready, and the supreme court had decided against the already announced legal complaints. “For the duration of this moratorium”—foreseeably several years—the train drivers would receive a monthly supplement of 2 percent.

Faced with this situation, it is clear that the DB management is acting in close concert with the government, and that a strike by drivers and conductors would mean a confrontation with the government.

The DB management, government, and DGB want to force the train drivers to prostrate themselves in order to limit the right to strike, and push through a new round of massive attacks on wages, social benefits, and working conditions for all workers. They have already brought the media on board, who agitated against the strikers during their recent protest actions. They will not hesitate to go to the courts in order to have the strike banned and to criminalise strikers.

To fight against this, a political programme is necessary that goes far beyond the limited conceptions of the GDL. From the start, train drivers must seek to mobilise support in all other sections of the working class that confront very similar problems. Growing privatisation and global competition are increasing exploitation, not only in air and rail transport, but are leading to harsher attacks in all other industries and services.

The train drivers must organise their strike as the beginning of a broad political movement against the government. This calls for a political programme that opposes the logic of capitalist profit and advocates a socialist perspective and an international strategy.

The strike must not be subordinated to the limited national perspective of the GDL as an occupational union.

It was already clear in earlier industrial disputes that the GDL is not prepared to conduct a consistent struggle against Deutsche Bahn and the government that stands behind it. In March 2008, the union broke off a months-long strike because its extension would have led to a confrontation with the government.

The GDL is part of the German Civil Servant Association (DBB), and the union’s chairman, Claus Weselsky, is not only a DBB executive member, but also belongs to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Weselsky and the GDL, like Cockpit, act as if a national union can defend the interests of workers in the age of global crisis if only it is more militant and less corrupt.

But this is an illusion. In reality, the struggle to defend workers’ rights and achievements immediately poses the question of political perspective. And here, the occupational unions agree with the DGB unions, despite all their conflicts. Both accept the capitalist profit system.

Weselsky has taken care not to damage the German economy. During the protest strikes at the beginning of September he rejected taking any joint strike action with Lufthansa and French pilots who were on strike. He said at the time, “We occupational unions act responsibly concerning our right to strike. We are taking care to ensure that through discussions there are no parallel strikes”.

In France as well, the pilots union brutally strangled the strike at precisely the moment other sections of the working class signalled their support and it could have become the launch point for a mobilisation against the Hollande government.

The train drivers and conductors’ readiness to fight is very welcome. But this poses the urgency of establishing the political and organisational independence of the working class on the basis of an international socialist programme.



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