

Germany: Nine-hour strike by train drivers

Our reporters
11 October 2014

On Tuesday evening, the train drivers union GDL called out its members at Deutsche Bahn AG on a nine-hour strike from 9 p.m. The week before, 91 percent of GDL members had voted for an indefinite strike. The nationwide strike, which lasted until 6 a.m. Wednesday morning, brought most of the long-distance and regional trains, freight trains and commuter trains throughout Germany to a halt.

The train drivers are demanding a 5 percent wage increase and a two-hour reduction in working hours from the current 39-hour week. The GDL also called out its members among conductors and on-board catering staff on strike. In the last years, a large proportion of the so-called mobile personnel had joined the GDL because the EVG, the rail union belonging to the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB), so obviously sits in the pocket of the employers and has supported their orgy of cuts and deregulation.

On Tuesday evening, WSWS reporters spoke to a group of striking train drivers in front of Frankfurt Central Station. They reported in detail how the changes on the railways in recent years have led to the complete subordination of staff to the needs of the business.

“Our working hours are so hectic,” a commuter train driver said. “How many times a day do you think a duty starts and ends with us? You can start again at any minute of the day. There are over a thousand variants, depending on how we are needed at any particular time.”

He explained how the duty roster does not take the slightest consideration of the staff into account. Drivers must often use their breaks in order to be able to promptly take over a train at the beginning of its route. “A lot of our free time is completely integrated into the work process,” he said. “It does not give us a chance to relax.”

An S-Bahn (commuter) train driver confirmed,

“Previously, our free time was more joined up. Care was taken that we did not have to use our breaks to get to our next job. Since the S-Bahn timetable change in December 2013, practically no more consideration is shown to us.” For example, he lives outside Frankfurt and often has to leave home two hours prior to the start of a shift to be on time to pick up a train. “As for me, up to six hours of my break time weekly are spent on this,” he said.

Drivers also reported how they had just 12 weekends off a year. All other weekends were either spent working or on standby.

Ingo Klett (second from left in photo) is a driver and deputy works council chairman in Frankfurt. He explained, “German train drivers are second to last place in Europe as far as earnings go. The most a train driver can earn is 3,187 euros gross per month.” The starting salary of a train driver in the early years is around €2,000 gross.

Klett pointed out that train drivers were shunting around about 3 million hours in overtime. He said, “Actually, Deutsche Bahn should hire over 2,237 [new] people.”

Some older drivers originally came from the East, where they had worked at the Staatsbahn in the former East Germany. One said, “Shortly after the merger of the Staatsbahn with the Bundesbahn [West German Railways], preparations for an IPO began in 1993. The whole operation was restructured according to the criteria of profitability.”

The drivers expressed their anger at the general media incitement against them. “Things are really being whipped up against us,” one driver said. “We hardly get an opportunity to put right all the lies. Even if a reporter records an interview properly, it is usually not used or it is falsified.”

The worst, they thought, was an article in *Spiegel Online* headlined “Germany’s Stupidest Union”. On

Monday, the online magazine accused the GDL of carrying out its struggle to the detriment of the remaining railway staff. [GDL chairman Claus] Weselsky was calling for “a holy war to boost his ego”, the magazine wrote.

One train driver said, “If they are talking about a holy war, then it’s to equate us with ISIS.” Others pointed out that most readers’ letters vehemently defended the train drivers against such allegations. A new poll for broadcaster ARD shows 54 percent of respondents are sympathetic to the train drivers.

The drivers are aware that their fight is about more than just a wage increase and reduction in working time. One train driver reported, “Especially in the last year, the tone of management has greatly changed. It is not only regarding rosters that nobody takes us into consideration. This is also shown by how stubbornly [Deutsche Bahn CEO Ulrich] Weber has responded to our demands.” Another said, “This looks like it will be a difficult and long struggle.”

The government is working with Deutsche Bahn and the EVG to introduce so-called “unified bargaining” in order to exclude the smaller occupational union GDL. One S-Bahn driver said, “We don’t know what the government is up to. If they introduce unified bargaining by law, it represents a fundamental attack on the right to strike.”

A younger driver said, “Deutsche Bahn has obviously provoked the whole conflict. The board will not budge; it is completely stubborn. I’m afraid the railway management wants to defeat us at all costs, to get rid of the GDL.” His conclusion, “We no longer have democracy, we only get to decide every four years as to who is going to deceive us.”

The law on unified bargaining being introduced by federal Minister of Labour Nahles (Social Democratic Party) would mean that only the union with the most members in the entire company could negotiate. Such a monopoly of power for the DGB-affiliated unions would exclude from negotiations the smaller unions such as GDL, Cockpit (pilots), UFO (air traffic controllers), Marburger Bund (doctors) and GdF (air traffic control). Given the fact that the DGB and its member unions work closely with big business and the government, this would mean the de facto abolition of the right to strike.

However, the strategy of the GDL is unable to

counter this danger. On Wednesday morning, shortly after the strike ended, GDL leader Weselsky promised the union would not call an indefinite strike, even though his members had agreed to such action by 91 percent in a ballot. “We are aware of our responsibility,” Weselsky said.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact