

# German media attacks train drivers' right to strike

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The train drivers' strike from Tuesday night to Wednesday morning last week has triggered furious attacks from the media. Although the strike occurred at night and was limited to only a few hours, the media's reaction went far beyond the degree normally reserved for such cases. *Spiegel Online* ran an article entitled "Germany's Stupidest Union". *Spiegel* columnist Yasmin El-Sharif accused Claus Weselsky, chairman of the GDL train drivers union, of acting exclusively in line with his own selfish desire for power.

The 37-year-old journalist, who previously worked in television for *European Business News* in London and *Bloomberg* in New York, wrote: "Weselsky's ego trip (was) the best advertising stunt the employers' associations could have wanted to promote their demand for a unified negotiated contract law." He urged that it was high time "that GDL members wake up and avoid winning the title of the stupidest union in the world".

The unified bargaining law, currently being prepared by the federal government in close cooperation with business associations and the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), stipulates that only the largest trade union in a company will be legally entitled to conduct negotiations with employers and call strikes. The DGB unions would thus have a monopoly on power, and smaller unions—such as GDL, Cockpit (pilots), UFO (air traffic controllers) and the Marburger Bund (doctors)—would lose the ability to defend their livelihoods. In practice, this amounts to the abolition of the right to strike. *Spiegel Online* criticises the train drivers for being themselves responsible for the abolition of the right to strike, when they were not prepared to voluntarily refrain from industrial action. According to El-Sharif, the train drivers and Lufthansa pilots should be aware that "each excessive demand"

plays into the hands of proponents of the unified bargaining law. "If the drivers do not change course, they will inadvertently be justifying their own disempowerment," he writes.

An online commentary from the *Südwestrundfunk* radio station finishes with almost the same words.

The *Süddeutsche* (SZ) newspaper attacks not only the strike, but also the demand for a five percent wage increase and two-hour reduction in the working week. Its Berlin parliament editor, Daniela Kuhr, claims these demands amount to an "overall increase of 15 percent". "This is how over-self-confident a union can become," she grumbles.

Above all, the SZ editor is outraged by the fact that the strike won the sympathy and support of broad sections of the population. That was "idiocy", she writes, scolding the passengers for their foolishness. She thought they were showing "acceptance of a strike that they haven't even begun to understand".

On the day before the strike, SZ head of internal affairs Heribert Prantl, who otherwise usually insists on respect for constitutional rights, referred to the wage dispute as a "sudden cramp". Prantl writes that he has no sympathy for this "unnecessary strike waged by union busybodies". The GDL leadership was only interested in competing with the DGB union, the EVG (railway and transport union). According to Prantl, it was thereby damaging itself and discrediting the branch-based unions.

Jochen Bittner, columnist for the *Die Zeit* newspaper, demanded on Thursday morning—covertly but unmistakably—that in the future, the drivers be forced to continue working and no longer be allowed to strike. Train drivers, pilots and other workers who do socially important work—according to Bittner, "those responsible for maintaining the crucial

infrastructure”—should all be official public servants. As public officials, every one of them would be adequately compensated, writes Bittner, adding, “And, most importantly, each would never again be permitted to go on strike.”

That is precisely the point. The right to strike is to be restricted and, de facto, abolished.

This attack on the right to strike is directly related to the return of German militarism. Since President Joachim Gauck and the federal government announced the end of military restraint at the beginning of the year, politicians and the media have been calling for a huge military upgrading, while Germany has been playing an increasingly active political and military role in the two most important international conflicts—in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Such aggressive great-power policies, adopted by the federal government in response to the mounting crisis of capitalism, are inimical to any social or political opposition within the country. The established parties and media have placed themselves firmly behind the government’s belligerent foreign policy. In lockstep, they churn out propaganda in a manner reminiscent of dictatorships. Democratic rights are eroded and the state’s surveillance and repression apparatus are systematically upgraded.

The attacks on the train drivers and the right to strike should be seen in this context. During the First World War one hundred years ago, the unions made a “truce” with the Reich government, ended all wage struggles and suppressed all strikes. Today, the DGB supports the federal government’s course towards war and is committed to limiting the right to strike.

Pushing for war and the abolition of the right to strike, newsroom hacks know that they have little to fear from the GDL (a branch of the conservative German Civil Service Federation) and its chairman Weselsky (a conservative Christian Democratic Union member). Their hatred extends from the train drivers to all other workers who fight for their rights and defend their wages and social gains. Their attacks must therefore be strongly resisted.



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