

German train drivers and pilots take strike action

Dietmar Henning
16 October 2014

The train drivers union, GDL, called its members out on strike again on Wednesday. In addition to the train drivers, conductors and on-board catering staff, dispatchers also took part in the 14-hour strike. Most Deutsche Bahn trains stood idle between 2 p.m. Wednesday and 4 a.m. Thursday morning. This affected long distance, regional and freight trains, as well as the S-Bahn (commuter trains).

The GDL is demanding a five percent pay rise for its members, a two-hour reduction in the work week, and a limit of 50 hours overtime per year.

Lufthansa pilots working for its subsidiary, German Wings, are taking strike action today from 12 noon until midnight. The German Wings pilots last took strike action for six hours at the end of August.

The industrial dispute concerns the future transitional arrangements for 5,400 pilots and co-pilots working for Lufthansa, Lufthansa Cargo, and German Wings. Lufthansa cancelled the previous arrangements at the end of 2013, and wants to impose massive cuts so that pilots would have to work longer before being able to take early retirement.

But both disputes concern far more than wage cuts, work time, and retirement rules. The GDL and pilots' union, Cockpit, are being put under massive pressure and deliberately provoked by Deutsche Bahn and Lufthansa.

The strikes are behind the enactment of a new law regarding so-called "unified bargaining". The law, which Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD) will present this autumn, would grant a monopoly of power to the members of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB). In future, only the largest union in an enterprise could conduct contract bargaining and call a strike. Smaller unions such as the GDL, Cockpit, UFO (flight controllers) and the Marburger Bund

(doctors) would lose their basis for existence.

In practice, this equates to abolishing the right to strike. A strike would only be possible with the agreement of the DGB unions, who have collaborated closely for years with the employers and government in imposing wage cuts, layoffs, and worsening conditions.

The media, politicians, and employers' associations are conducting an intensive campaign against the train drivers and pilots, in order to prepare the ground for this law whose constitutionality is highly questionable.

While the pilots are presented as "aristocratic employees" who are defending their "privileges", this tack is not possible with the train drivers, whose tough working conditions and six-day workweek in which they gross just €2,500 per month. For this reason, the media attack union chairman Claus Weselsky, to discredit the legitimate struggle of the GDL. He is regularly described as an "egomaniac", "egoist", or as conducting a "holy war" and suffering from "megalomania".

Deutsche Bahn director of personnel Ulrich Weber, yesterday, accused the union of acting in pure self-interest. On broadcaster ZDF's morning news show, Weber said he had agreed to meet Weselsky for talks on Wednesday or Thursday. "The fact that hours before this conversation even begins, the GDL calls a strike," said Weber, "that's an audacity and impudence".

In fact, Weber, who goes unchallenged in the media, made the GDL the provocative "offer" that train drivers' wages would rise by 2 percent until the unified bargaining law comes into force, which could take years. "The Deutsche Bahn is demanding from us that we stand still until we are legally abolished", commented Weselsky.

Board member Weber is supported by the DGB-affiliated trade union Railway and Transport (EVG).

Weber has refused to negotiate as long as the GDL will not agree with the EVG as to who represents which occupational groups in the negotiations. The EVG claims to represent all occupational groups apart from the train drivers. The GDL points out that it has more members than the DGB trade union among the “mobile staff”, and has demanded “autonomous” negotiations. Subordinating the GDL to the EVG anticipates the introduction of the unified bargaining law.

The EVG is playing a key role in Deutsche Bahn’s moves against the GDL, and thus against the right to strike. Yesterday, EVG chairman Alexander Kirchner accused the GDL of dividing the workforce. “The polarization and division of the workforce must finally come to an end,” the EVG chairman urged. All participants must “take responsibility for the entire workforce”, says the EVG press statement.

For Kirchner and the EVG, “trade union solidarity” and “cooperation” mean the subordination of the workforce to the interests of the company and the state.

The attacks on the train drivers’ and pilots’ right to strike are preparation for massive social conflicts. The government is reacting to the economic and political crisis of the European Union with aggressive militarism abroad and attacks on democratic and social rights at home.

Since President Joachim Gauck and the government announced the end of the policy of military abstention at the beginning of the year, the German military has been massively rearming. Germany is already playing an active political and military role in the two most important international conflicts at present—Ukraine and the Middle East.

Social and political conflicts are inevitable. The billions being spent on rearming are being recouped through additional cuts in social spending, while military intervention by the Bundeswehr (armed forces) is rejected by the overwhelming majority of the population. The united front of the media, politicians, corporations, and the DGB is directed against this.

A hundred years ago, the unions agreed to an “industrial truce” with the German imperial government during the First World War, halting all disputes over wages and suppressing strikes. Today, the DGB supports the government’s war policy and is seeking to limit the right to strike.

The limited perspective of Christian Democrat

Weselsky and the GDL, which belongs to the Civil Servants Association, offers no real opposition. Growing militarism and the accompanying attacks on workers’ rights call for a political answer—the unification of all workers on the basis of a socialist programme.

Weselsky sees the strike as a means to stop the decline in union membership, among other things, and is already signalling his willingness to make concessions.

He told *Die Welt* he is concerned that the unions only represent 18 percent of the workforce nationwide. “The GDL opposes this development and is playing a leading role in the trade union movement.” Addressing Deutsche Bahn, he said, “The employer knows we are prepared to make concessions in negotiations.”

The attacks on Weselsky are really directed at the train drivers, pilots, and all workers who fight for their rights and seek to defend their wages and social gains.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact