# Defend striking German train drivers and airline pilots!

**Ulrich Rippert**
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Last weekend's strike by train drivers at Deutsche Bahn, Germany's national rail operator, has provoked howls of rage from the media, government and the German trade union confederation (DGB).

"No one has ever dared to do this before: a 50-hour strike at Deutsche Bahn," raged Korinna Budras in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (FAS)* newspaper. She described her comment as an "outburst of anger" against the head of the train drivers' union (GDL) Claus Weselsky. In the headline, she demanded, "Stop this man!" The "unchecked power grab of a small professional trade union" could no longer be tolerated.

The 38-year-old journalist, who spent a year in Washington as an exchange student while at school, and went on to work for Bloomberg in New York, wrote that the train drivers' demands sound "like the complaints of a spoilt brat who demands to be the leader."

Marcus Werner was even more aggressive in the *Wirtschaftswoche.* He accused GDL head Weselsky of making "national fools" out of the train drivers. The GDL's action was "absolutely crazy," wrote Werner.

He described the strike as led by someone with "an outsider's complex" who had run amuck, who strains "every sinew for recognition," and for whom "almost any means are justified in the end to be the centre of attention." He sought to paint the strikers as terrorists, writing, "It is not an art to bring about chaos. That only requires a threatening call with a disguised voice. Anyone can do that. But apparently it feels totally great for some to be responsible for chaos."

It is time, he said, to curb the power of the profession-based trade unions and to "get rid of their impudence," so that "a self-appointed few can no longer bring society to a halt." The "small barking dogs" had to be called to heel.

Where does this gutter talk, reminiscent of the language of the Nazi military paper *Der Stürmer*, come from?

The same journalists who attack the strike have defended the bailout of the banks with hundreds of billions of euros. This has been accompanied by the unrestricted enrichment of a tiny layer at the top of society. They support the austerity programmes throughout Europe that have devastated society and produced the growth of extreme right-wing parties. They beat the drum for military rearmament and war.

In the train drivers' strike, which enjoys widespread popular support, the ruling elite sees an expression of the growing opposition to the government's anti-social policies and drive to war. Military rearmament and war, which are being promoted by the government and media, is combined with the suppression of all political and social opposition.

On Monday afternoon, the online edition of *Stern* magazine appeared with the headline "Nahles has to stop the blackmailer Weselsky." The lifestyle magazine of the upper class recently praised the appointment of Ursula Von der Leyen as war minister, and is now calling for firm action by the Social Democratic labour minister Andrea Nahles.

Over the weekend, Nahles announced that her ministry was working aggressively on a draft law for contract bargaining. The law would ensure that only the trade union with the most members at a company would be allowed to negotiate contracts in the future. This would grant the DGB a power monopoly, and weaken the position of smaller unions like GDL, Cockpit (the pilots union), UFO (the air traffic controllers' union), and Marburger Bund (the doctors' union).

In the face of the fact that the DGB and its component unions are closely tied to big business and the government, this, in practice, would mean, banning the right to strike. Workers' struggles opposing the DGB's co-management and close collaboration with the government would then be illegal.

Under these conditions it is urgently necessary that all

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workers support the strikes by train drivers and pilots, and reject the vicious media campaign to demonize them.

The weekend strike by train drivers was followed by a two-day strike by airline pilots. The pilots' demand for the maintenance of the company's early retirement system, and the train drivers' call for a 5 percent pay rise and a two-hour reduction in the work week are more than justified. For years, the employees of transport companies have been confronted with attacks on pay and working conditions. Deutsche Bahn reduced its workforce from 350,000 in 2002 to 190,000 in 2012 resulting in increased workloads for the remaining employees. Deutsche Bahn employees worked almost 8 million overtime hours last year.

The GDL's demand to be able not only to represent train drivers in the future, but also conductors, catering staff, trainers and dispatchers is also justified. They were prevented from doing so until the end of June, because until then a so-called fundamental collective agreement was in force under which only the railway and transport union (IVG) was allowed to represent those workers.

IVG is the successor union to Transnet and GdED, and has worked with management in recent years to force through massive job cuts. As a result, many employees joined the GDL during this period.

The DGB and IVG are supporting the government in their struggle against the GDL. IVG chairman Alexander Kirchner is deputy chairman on the board of Deutsche Bahn AG. His claim that the GDL demand splits the workforce is absurd and dishonest.

Using virtually the same words as Deutsche Bahn management, Kirchner claimed that different contracts for wages, work times, the regulation of holidays and breaks, and other working conditions at the same company were not practicable and would disrupt "peaceful operations." This argument has been repeated a hundred times in the media.

In reality, it has become a common practice to have different contracts for the same job. Often this practice has been introduced by the DGB, which has been resisting the demand for equal pay for the same work for years.

Workers are employed not only in the large auto plants, manufacturing and chemical industry in the same department carrying out the same activities under completely different terms, but also in almost every factory and administrative organisation. Apart from the traditional agreements, there are contracts for new hires, as well as 10, 20 or even 50 sub-groups in each factory. Then there are temporary workers on cheap-wage contracts, and then the job contractors whose wages are even lower and working conditions worse.

These divisions have been aimed at forcing down wages and undermining working conditions. Now, when the train drivers and pilots are fighting to resist this downward spiral, Kirchner, the DGB and the business press suddenly cry it is dividing the workforce.

Their demand for unity is the demand for the unlimited dictatorship of the DGB bureaucracy in order to suppress any opposition in factories and workplaces.

Deutsche Bahn management, the government and the DGB intend to force the train drivers to concede to their demands and limit the right to strike in preparation for a new round of major attacks on wages, welfare benefits and working conditions for all workers.

One hundred years ago, during the First World War, the trade unions agreed to "industrial peace" with the government, halted all wage struggles and suppressed all strikes. Today, the DGB backs the military rearmament program of the German government and is doing all in its power to restrict workers rights.

This cannot be permitted. In order for workers to fight back, the strikes of train drivers and pilots must be defended and supported. Workers are confronted by the same problems everywhere. Privatisation and impact of global competition are not only intensifying exploitation in the air and rail industries, but are also connected with stepped-up attacks on workers in every other industrial and service sector.

The strikes by train drivers and pilots must be made the starting point for a broad political movement in opposition to the German government. This requires a political programme that goes well beyond the limited outlook of the GDL and Cockpit. Workers must fight for a program that rejects the logic of the capitalist profit system, and must take up a socialist perspective and an international strategy.

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