

Trade unions and media denounce German train drivers

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The walkout by German train drivers that began Wednesday has evoked a frenzied slander campaign on the part of the media, as well as government officials, directed at both striking workers and German train driver union (GDL) chairman, Claus Weselsky.

The strike is hitting both long-distance and regional trains, plus sections of the city transport system in Berlin. It is the sixth strike in an ongoing dispute and the longest since the founding of the Deutsche Bahn AG (German Rail, DB) in 1994.

The German train drivers union, GDL, said it renewed its strike in an attempt to prevent the state-owned DB and the federal government from breaking up the union. “We want and must negotiate on behalf of all of our members, who work for DB, whether as train drivers, conductors, train catering staff, schedulers, trainers, instructors or shunting staff,” Weselsky said. “This basic right is in danger and along with it the function of trade unions per se.”

In the days leading up to the walkout, the government, the DB executive and the corporate media poured out denunciations. *Spiegel Online* carried the headline, “Mega-rail strike by the GDL: Weselsky loses all sense of proportion.” The quote stems from remarks by the Social Democrat (SPD) general secretary, Yasmin Fahimi, who fiercely attacked the union. She warned rail customers' of “impending days of chaos” and called on the union to withdraw its strike plan.

Fahimi stated that the latest walkout by the GDL was harming all unions and damaging “solidarity within the DB workforce”. This is a deliberate distortion of the facts. There are good reasons for the GDL's refusal of one of DB's key demands —the subordination of the GDL to the rival Railway and Transport union (EVG), which is affiliated to the main German Federation of

Trade Unions, the DGB. The EVG emerged out of the Transnet and GdED transport unions and, in recent years, played a major role in the implementation of massive job cuts in close collaboration with the DB executive.

In cooperation with the ECG and its predecessor organizations, DB reduced its workforce from 350,000 to 190,000 between 2002 and 2012. At the same time, work pressure intensified for those retaining their jobs. Last year, rail employees worked nearly eight million hours of overtime.

Fahimi's statements make clear that the SPD is at the forefront of the attacks on the striking drivers. She is supported by the DGB, whose chairman, Reiner Hoffmann, told the press he was appalled by the GDL decision to renew its strike.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called for a stop to the “100-hour strike” and for legal action to be taken against it. The DB executive had been far too slow to react, the paper claimed. “In the legendary wage dispute of 2007/2008 DB reacted very differently.” the paper asserted, and demanded an “immediate legal action to ban the announced strikes”.

During talks last weekend, the GDL met with DB negotiators on no less than three occasions, but the rail executive refused to make any concessions. The GDL is demanding it be allowed to lead contract talks on behalf of its members, while the DB executive is insisting the GDL hand over its negotiating rights to the EVG.

The stance taken by the DB executive would effectively strip the GDL of any right to negotiate. In anticipation of such a development, Labour Minister Andreas Nahles (SPD) submitted a bill last week, extending the attack on the GDL to all the smaller trade unions, which would also be required to capitulate to

the will of larger unions affiliated to the DGB.

The rejection of the DB position by Weselsky was supported by Klaus Dauderstädt, the chairman of the German Civil Servants to which the GDL is affiliated. In view of the stance taken by DB, it was “entirely understandable that Mr. Weselsky cannot sign”, Dauderstädt told several newspapers. He added that the rail company was demanding “a kind of declaration of submission” from the GDL.

It is clear that an example is to be made of the train drivers. The argument of the DB executive that it is seeking to avoid different rates and conditions among sections of workers is absurd. The DGB unions and German companies, including DB, permit all sorts of different rates for workers doing the same job. Virtually every factory and office in Germany employs numerous groups of employees—temporary and permanent contract employees, temporary workers, agency workers, factory contract workers, so-called mini-jobbers or freelancers—all at different pay rates. New hires also usually receive much less than their colleagues who are employed for longer terms.

The claim that the DB and the government are seeking to abolish different tariffs in a company or occupational group has nothing to do with reality, and is only rolled out in an attempt to prevent or ban strikes by workers for better incomes and working conditions.

Consequently the concentrated media smear-campaign is directed not just against the GDL and its chairman, Claus Weselsky. The conflict has been deliberately provoked in order to create the conditions to undermine the right to strike for all workers.

In this situation, it is imperative that workers oppose the attack by the government, media and DGB against the striking train drivers.

The German political elite is intent on intensifying its attacks on the working population in the coming period. Workers and their families are to foot the bill for the deepening economic crisis, the trillion-euro bailout of the banks and the cost of the planned rearmament of Germany.

New attacks on railway employees are also in the pipeline. According to the *Handelsblatt* business newspaper, DB plans to make much more extensive spending cuts than previously claimed. *Handelsblatt* writes, “DB will have to draw the lion's share of its planned investment program from its own resources.”

DB will have to find 5.2 billion euros to this end. “The plan is a tour de force,” writes the financial newspaper. Overall, the company is expected to generate around a 4.3 billion euros dividend by 2020.

This “enforced dividend” is to be extorted from rail workers in the form of jobs and wage cuts and a further deterioration of working conditions.



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