

German train drivers continue strike

Our correspondents
8 November 2014

Train drivers and conductors in the GDL trade union are continuing their strike. Along with freight trains, passenger services have been affected by the strike since Thursday. While the media and politicians are doing everything to smear the striking train drivers, they have considerable popular support.

Deutsche Bahn lodged an application at the labour court in Frankfurt on Thursday in an attempt to force the drivers back to work. The judges issued a compromise in the evening, which remained unpublished. At first it was unclear if the negotiating parties had agreed to the proposal or if the court was still reaching a decision.

On public television ARD's Morgenmagazin on Thursday, GDL leader Claus Weselsky declared that a precondition for any agreement was the recognition of the GDL as a negotiating partner for the conductors it represented. "Deutsche Bahn has to stop violating the fundamental rights of train drivers and conductors," said Weselsky. Thus far, management has refused to negotiate separate comprehensive agreements with the GDL.

Deutsche Bahn's judicial action was accompanied by a raging media campaign against the train drivers. Representatives of all parties attacked the strikers and demanded an end to the action. By contrast, the population has met the strike with sympathy.

At Ostbahnhof in Berlin, dozens of strikers gathered to inform passengers about their demands.

Jürgen, a train driver, explained the connection between privatisation and the deterioration in working conditions. "Deutsche Bahn is always cutting back. Nothing is accepted that costs money. Care and waiting have been neglected, workshop staff laid off. As a driver, I now take on the responsibilities of a train driver, head conductor, of preparing the train, and a lot more. All for the same pay."

Train driver Axel stated that working conditions had

gotten progressively worse in recent years, and that the only direction pursued was more layoffs. "Shifts are increasingly directed towards being effective. Breaks have been reduced so much that it can't go on. Train drivers are sent across the country, have to stay overnight in hotels and are in this way separated from their families. Co-workers call this a denial of their freedom. Deutsche Bahn operates so many trains. Why can't it be organised differently?"

The workers no longer matter, only efficiency. "All times are almost measured in seconds," he said. The result of this burden is that workers are laid off, while those who remain have to do more overtime. "That's why we want to improve the conditions for all rail staff."

The strike was also about organising in an independent trade union and being allowed to strike, Axel noted. "The basic principle of a large trade union is actually good, because it is strong," he said. "But the question has to be asked, why are the DGB (German trade union confederation) unions losing so many members? Why does the Margburger Bund (doctors' union) in some areas organise more staff in hospitals than Verdi? Workers don't feel they are represented by the trade unions any more."

"One only has to look at history," Mirko, a train driver, intervened. "Then one can say why people are leaving the EVG (the DGB-aligned rail union). The trade union and its predecessor organised the privatisation of the railway with the SPD (Social Democrats)." Since then, he added, everything has been about maximising profits. "The EVG collaborated with everything."

Uwe, a train driver from Berlin, also saw the defence of the right to strike as a central issue in the strike action. "Twenty five years ago, we took to the streets for our basic rights. We got rid of the unified trade union (the East German trade union), because as

employees we were not represented by it. Now we are to give up these basic rights and be compelled to join a massive union. What do the politicians want from us?”

Along with train drivers, conductors and many other rail workers who had moved from the EVG to the GDL in recent years were also present. A train conductor explained that she had joined the GDL after the head of the EVG predecessor, Norbert Hansen of Transnet, had joined company management and made millions for himself. “I thought then, this is not a trade union that represents my interests.”

There were fewer signs of the strike at the central train station in Stuttgart. In southern Germany, the number of train drivers employed as public servants is much higher than in the rest of the country. They are banned from striking. Two co-workers employed as public servants expressed their full solidarity with the strike. They were shocked by the hysteria in the media.

Passengers also showed their solidarity and opposed the media campaign. “As an employee I support the strike,” a passenger said. “Even though I have to wait over an hour for my train. A strike is always a means to push for demands that would otherwise be denied.”

At the train station in Essen we spoke with Patricia, who works in the care sector and comes from Leipzig. She compared the hysteria in the media against the train drivers with war reporting. “As in war, the first victim is the truth,” she said.

The media was portraying it as if all that is involved is a struggle between the trade unions. “I don’t agree with this presentation. The small trade unions are not superfluous.”

She had previously experienced how bad the large trade unions in the care sector were. “Public service union Verdi is above all concerned with fighting for its own interests, not those of the workers.” The right to have one’s own union and independent strikes had to be defended.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact