

German GDL union shuts down train drivers' strike

Our correspondents
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The German train drivers' union (GDL or Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer) shut down its strike on Saturday, cutting short a previously announced five-day walkout against the national rail operator Deutsche Bahn (DB). The GDL ended the action, which had halted two thirds of rail service in the country, even as a Frankfurt court rejected an appeal from DB to order an end to the strike.

GDL leader Claus Weselsky called the union's action a gesture of reconciliation." The union, which had come under attack from every political party, including the Left Party, ended the work stoppage a day and a half early allowing the government to conduct Sunday's official celebrations marking the fall of the Berlin Wall without transportation disruptions.

Weselsky called off the action Friday at the end of a rally that saw more than 1,000 striking train drivers, conductors and other workers demonstrate in front of DB's Berlin headquarters. Workers showed their determination to fight for a pay raise, a shorter workweek and unite with other DB workers to fight for improved conditions. The GDL is seeking to organize other workers besides drivers and engineers and negotiate a contract separate from other unions. DB management opposes this demand, along with the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) and the largest railroad union, the Railway and Transport union (EVG), which have long collaborated in the destruction of railroad workers' jobs and conditions.

At the rally, many strikers drew attention to the sharp deterioration of working conditions and demanded a reduction of the working day, their banners proclaiming, "Overtime without end!" and "Our batteries are empty—It's time for a recharge".

Others carried banners insisted that railway workers had the right to choose the union they wanted to join

and have the right to strike. "Basic rights are not negotiable", read one.

Responding to media witch hunt against Claus Weselsky, other slogans urged, "Stay tough, Claus!" and "Claus, keep at it!"

Deputy GDL chairman Norbert Quitter drew applause as he welcomed groups of striking railway workers from numerous German federal states. He said GDL was no longer a professional association of just train drivers but a union enjoying growing support from other sections of the train service staff. The strike was "solidarity in practice" and had "nothing to do with splitting the workforce," he said.

Immediately afterwards, however, the GDL leadership announced the strike would not be continued until Monday, as originally announced, but would end Saturday evening. Union officials claimed that although the strike had been cut short the dispute would continue. By evening, union officials gave no justification for their decision.

The GDL's legal argument had previously been accepted by the Frankfurt labour court and Hessian regional labour court. In both instances, the judges refused to issue a restraining order to terminate the labour dispute. During the hearing, however, lengthy discussion ensued as to whether the GDL's intention to continue the strike on Sunday constituted disproportionate industrial action since it could prevent many people who wanted to visit or participate in the Berlin Wall memorial events from reaching the capital. It can be assumed the federal government and all the established political parties put huge pressure on the GDL to return their members to work.

This contrasted with the militant sentiment of many at the rally who wanted the strike to continue precisely because anniversary celebrations were taking place. A

train driver from Magdeburg said, “This is our contribution to the commemoration of the fall of the wall. We don’t want a single political party or a single trade union. If we did, we wouldn’t have had to abolish the FDGB (Free German Trade Union Federation of former Stalinist East Germany).”

Two train drivers had brought along self-made placards. One read, “We were here 25 years ago to fight for our rights! Today we must do it again!” The Hanover train driver holding the sign explained then as now the system had to be opposed. “The big unions have forgotten how to defend workers’ rights,” said his fellow worker. “Now they want to prevent the GDL from doing just that, because the DGB unions are easier for the companies to handle. But a trade union that no longer represents workers’ rights has no right to exist anymore”.

Rail employees see the attempt to limit the right to strike in a far wider context. One worker told the WSWs, “I suspect the attack on the right to strike is connected with preparations for attacks on social conditions in Germany and all over Europe—and with the growing militarism.” He continued by saying the only way to defend workers’ rights was via a Europe-wide mobilisation.

His colleague said that the media incitement against the drivers reminded him of the belligerent campaign against Russia at the beginning of the year, adding, “The media is marching in lockstep. One part of it reviles the train drivers and the rest follow suit. That’s how it was 25 years ago. But people no longer want to put up with that sort of thing.”

Werner, a 41-year-old train driver employed for many years in regional transport, said, “Since 2005 we’ve had one cut after another. As a train driver I now have to do various additional things previously done by another rail worker. Nowadays I’m responsible for ensuring that none of the other passengers are standing on the edge of the platform before my train leaves the station. If a drunken man staggered into the departing train I’d be held responsible.”

His colleague Klaus, 38, who works with the Berlin tram network, said, “Actually, the whole DGB should be calling for a general strike because it’s all about everybody’s right to strike. We are very aware there is much more at stake in this conflict than many people realise”.

Gisela, a 29-year-old employee in Deutsche Bahn’s central administration, had come to speak on behalf of workers in the DB central office in Berlin. “Many in our office don’t want to participate in the demonstration, maybe because they don’t want the department heads to know they support the strike, but I think it’s very important and I absolutely had to come down.

“We must do something because otherwise there will be no one to stand up to this attack on our fundamental right to form unions and to strike. I’m angry about the GDL becoming the target of so many media attacks that are simply below the belt,” she said, adding that it was time to fight back and not be intimidated.



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