

German train drivers strike for seventh time in a year

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The German train drivers' union (GDL) has called a nationwide strike of employees at Deutsche Bahn (DB) for the seventh time in one year. The work stoppage on passenger trains began early on Wednesday at 2:00 a.m. and ended on Thursday at 9:00 p.m. On freight trains, the strike began on Tuesday at 3:00 p.m. Drivers were only due to recommence work at 9:00 a.m. today.

The reasons for the renewed strike are the actions of DB, which is trying to postpone talks until a new law on contract agreements comes into force in the summer. Based on this law, DB intends to make negotiations with GDL, and strikes by the union, impossible.

The German government has revealed it plans to adopt the law in May. According to the law, wage conflicts organised by smaller trade unions, such as the train drivers, the pilots' association Cockpit, the air traffic controllers (UFO), and doctors (Marburger Bund), will be rendered practically impossible. According to the law, if there are several trade unions active in an organisation and no agreement exists over the workers they represent, only the agreement reached with the largest union will apply.

At DB, this would not be the GDL, but the larger railway union (EVG). EVG, a member of the German trade union confederation (DGB), has already made clear that it stands firmly on the side of management and is prepared to exclude the GDL with the help of the new law.

The GDL-led struggle has now lasted almost a year. Even after 16 rounds of talks, DB continues to refuse a collective agreement. The only exception to this was a one-off payment of €510 for the second half of 2014.

At the most recent round of talks in Frankfurt on April 17, GDL reported that it was presented with a document containing a passage permitting DB to overturn all previous agreements. Since GDL refused to

sign, DB management accused the union of blocking the talks.

Without reporting any of the technical details, the media is repeating this accusation and agitating against the striking train drivers.

Another point of conflict is the dividing of the train drivers into different groups, which DB intends to uphold at all costs. According to the GDL, DB has been classifying train drivers' jobs as yard engineers. While they perform the same work, they are paid much lower wages and there are fewer regulations of their work patterns. GDL head Weselsky has spoken of "internal company wage dumping."

At the same time, DB's board has approved multi-million euro management bonuses. According to *Handelsblatt*, they cashed in target bonuses totaling €7.28 million in 2014. Even though sales and profit targets were not met, this is double the sum of €3.42 million awarded the previous year. The financial newspaper reported that in particular the short-term bonuses paid out immediately had increased, from €1.9 million to €5.2 million. This equated to a rise of 174 percent.

GDL referred to this "self-serving mentality" at the top of the company and, in this context, described the complaints from the board about the cost of the strikes as superficial and dishonest. "An agreement, even with the 100 percent fulfillment of GDL's demands, would be much cheaper," a GDL press release stated.

DB is being supported by industrial big business. Dieter Schweer, member of the central management of Germany's industrial confederation (BDI), vehemently criticised the GDL's strikes and warned of costs running into the millions. "Economic losses caused by the strikes could quickly rise from a single-figure million sum into the hundreds of millions per day," he

said. Branches hit especially hard are the chemical, steel and auto industries. According to Schweer, the GDL was acting irresponsibly and had “lost all proportionality.”

Employer associations, politicians and large sections of the media are seeking to make the GDL union responsible for the latest strike. DB’s human resources head has been repeatedly cited as saying, “GDL could have had its desired interim outcome at almost every point in the talks.”

However, the emphasis rests on the word “almost.” This is because Weber and DB management continue to insist that GDL defer to the EVG to represent other train staff, which includes conductors, caterers, signallers and yard engineers. Both unions ought to agree to an agreement for all rail workers. By contrast, the GDL is demanding its own agreements for its members.

Although GDL stubbornly insists on its right to negotiate an agreement for all of its members, it has no perspective for breaking through the blocking tactics of DB management. GDL repeatedly calls for “serious talks” and seeks to pressure management to make compromises by offering their own concessions. As they noted in a press release, GDL had “cut its demand for a reduction in weekly working hours to one hour and removed a pay band.”

But this willingness to compromise emboldens DB management to intensify their attacks on train drivers.

The conflict between GDL and DB, just as with the pilots’ association UFO and Lufthansa, makes clear that the employees and the entire working class confront political tasks.

The grand coalition led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democrats, CDU) and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democrats, SPD) plans to impose cuts in Germany of the type that they are currently imposing on the Greek population. Their revival of militarism demands billions for rearmament, for which the working population is to pay. Organised protests against the coming wars, as well as social attacks, are to be suppressed. The new contract law will serve as a first step in this process. It is to give the DGB-aligned unions unrestrained control over the workers in private industry and public services.

An interview with CDU deputy chairman, Michael Fuchs, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* makes clear the

central goal of the contract law. In the entire area of essential services, a practical ban on strikes must apply, Fuchs stated. Along with air and train transport, he named “the provision of energy and water, medical services, childcare and the telecommunications sector.”

Responding to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s point that in comparison to other countries there are few strikes in Germany, Fuchs answered that with the pilot and train driver strikes a tendency was becoming clear. “This is the problem,” he said. “Nip it in the bud.” By the time a “particular tendency to strike” existed, it would be too late to do anything about it.

An example is to be made of the GDL so as to intimidate all opposition in industry. To fight against the united front of company management, the government and DGB, train drivers and all other workers must turn to a new political perspective.

In an article last November, the WSWS wrote, “The hope that it would be possible to combat the dictatorship of the DGB with a less corrupt and more militant profession-based trade union has proven to be flawed. The problems confronting train drivers cannot be resolved through trade union militancy.” It is necessary to reject the profit logic of capitalism, fight for a socialist program and pursue an international strategy.

To construct a political leadership capable of pointing the way forward, the ICFI is organising the International May Day Online Rally. Join us on May 3! Fight for the international mobilisation of the working class against imperialist war and capitalism!



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