

The political issues in the German train drivers strike

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The fighting spirit of the German train drivers and conductors is extremely significant. After seven strikes and eight months of contract negotiations, they have begun the longest strike in the history of the Deutsche Bahn (DB).

Contrary to representations in the media, many workers in other industries welcome this strike. They know only too well the problems confronting the train drivers and conductors on a daily basis. Everywhere, jobs are being cut and working conditions are worsening. Workers are constantly under fire.

Parallel to the strike of the train drivers, contract disputes and protest actions are taking place among postal workers, at Deutsche Postbank, in hospitals such as the Charité in Berlin, in daycare centers, schools and in other workplaces. At the same time, an army of millions of low wage workers, Hartz IV recipients and workers with precarious employment are being driven into ever deeper poverty.

The train driver and conductor strike will be seen as the start of a struggle against a ruthless financial elite, which endlessly enriches itself at the expense of society. DB head Rüdiger Grube, his lead negotiator Ulrich Weber and the other members of the board of directors earn millions annually; in some cases ten thousand euros per day or more.

With their strike, the train drivers have tremendous power. A tightly synchronized industrial production process that is planned to avoid any storage costs means that a railway strike can paralyze production within just a few days. Business associations are talking about losses of 100 million euros each day of the strike in freight traffic alone.

However, it would be incorrect and irresponsible to suggest that the problems workers face can be solved quickly and easily by means of a strike mobilization. To claim that a strike lasting a few days could force the DB executive board to give in would be to completely underestimate the extent and significance of the struggle.

The DB executive board is working in close coordination with the government, which is still a shareholder in the Bahn AG. The government prepared this confrontation in order to force the train drivers to their knees and thereby initiate a massive round of attacks on every section of the working class.

The media is already campaigning against the strike. Representatives of the government are demanding compulsory

negotiations in order to suppress it. If that does not work, the courts will be brought in to forbid the strike on the grounds that it is excessive and ruin the union with demands for payment of damages.

The German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) is clearly on the side of the government and the DB executive board. It has mobilized strikebreakers and is making an effort to isolate the striking train drivers.

The striking workers must react to this attack with the same vigour and determination and prepare for an escalation of the class struggle.

This demands, above all, an understanding of the political significance and dimensions of the train drivers and conductors strike. The traditional concept of union militancy is inadequate. In order to lead the strike to success, it is necessary to fight for an international socialist program.

The strike is taking place in the context of an intensification of the international crisis of capitalism and the European Union. The government has reacted to this crisis by reviving German militarism. A massive remilitarization has been initiated following declarations from President Joachim Gauck and other leading figures in the government of the end of German military restraint last year.

Under these circumstances, the eruption of class struggle is inevitable, which must take a political form. In order to raise billions to arm the military, the government is preparing massive social cuts. At the same time, fundamental democratic rights are coming under attack as part of the preparation for new deployments of the armed forces in the face of widespread popular opposition.

At the center of this attack is the abolition of the right to strike. This is the significance of the law on contract unity that Minister of Employment Andrea Nahles (Social Democratic Party, SPD) is rapidly pushing through parliament with the aim of bringing it into effect before the summer break. She is collaborating closely with the DGB in this effort.

The aim of the law is to cement the control of the DGB bureaucracy in all workplaces. In the future, only DGB unions would have the right to negotiate wage contracts, determine their duration and, consequently, decide when workers will not be permitted to strike. Every strike organized by workers

themselves would be considered illegal in advance.

The DGB unions have sabotaged every significant workers' struggle for many years. They have undermined the fundamental right of workers to defend themselves against job cuts, pay cuts and increasing stress on the job.

The EVG (Railway and Transport Union), which is affiliated with the DGB, has functioned from the beginning as a tame "company union." It cannot be distinguished from the DB executive board. It has organized job cuts on a massive scale, which have resulted in endless overtime, restrictions on rest periods, stress on the job, separation of workers from their families for days on end and other precarious working conditions.

The functionaries of the DGB union are compensated for their services with lush salaries and privileges. The rise of Norbert Hansen—who was switched to head of personnel of the DB from his post as president of the DGB union Transnet, and collected millions in the process—is still in recent memory.

The reason for this transformation of the unions is not only the undoubted corruption of many of their functionaries. The degeneration of the unions and their management into tools of the corporations and the government, a process that has taken place simultaneously all over the world, has deep objective causes in the transformation of the world economy as a whole. The globalization of production has destroyed the objective foundation of every social and labor market policy based on the nation state.

If the unions could put pressure on the corporations to make at least temporary concessions to the workers in the past, today the situation is the exact opposite. The unions and the work councils blackmail the workers in order to carry out cuts and achieve competitive advantages for the corporations.

It is extremely important to understand this objective basis for the transformation of the unions because this same analysis applies no less to the small, specialized trade unions.

GDL head Claus Weselsky and the union behave as though in the age of global crisis of the capitalist system, a national union can defend the interests of the workers if it were simply a little bit more militant and less corrupt. This is an illusion. In reality, the struggle to defend the rights and achievements of workers immediately raises the question of political perspective. And in this question the small trade unions agree with the DGB unions, in spite of their differences on secondary questions. Both support and defend the capitalist system of private profit.

This is the real reason for Weselsky's restraint, which appears to many train drivers as mere wavering or hesitation. Weselsky does not want to fight against the government. He himself is a member of the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU). He is only trying to move the government and the DB executive board to a compromise by means of the strike and some fighting rhetoric. But they are not interested in a compromise. They want capitulation that will set the stage for another round of massive social attacks.

If the strike remains under the control of the GDL and is subordinated to the nationally restricted perspective of the union, it is doomed to failure. Instead, the strike must be made the point of departure for a broad political movement against the government. The train drivers, who often cross national borders and have international connections, must call on the support of workers all over Europe who are faced with the same basic issues.

Train drivers and all other workers must go beyond the restricted concept of union militancy and turn to a new political perspective. The hope that it might be possible to counter the dictatorship of the DGB with a less corrupt and more militant specialized union has proven false. What is necessary is a political party that opposes capitalist profit with an international strategy and fights for a socialist program. This party exists. It is the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG).

Workers must recall their own history, which did not begin with the unions in Germany, but with a revolutionary, socialist party. Under the leadership of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, and based on the revolutionary theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, early social democracy and the working class awoke to political life. The unions arose later and, from the beginning, made up the right wing, pro-capitalist section of the SPD.

The unions shared a large portion of the responsibility of the great betrayal of 1914, when the SPD supported the First World War. They also rejected the uprising in November 1918 and the Russian revolution of October 1917. Later, they used the crimes of the Stalinists to justify their anti-communism.

Leon Trotsky, the left opposition and the Fourth International fought untiringly against them and presented a socialist perspective. The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit represents this historical continuity. The building of rank-and-file committees of the PSG, and the discussion and clarification of these historical questions, is the central task in preparing for the coming resurgence of class struggle that has begun with the present strike.



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