

German train drivers' strike: "This is about our basic right to strike"

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The contract dispute involving German train drivers and conductors has entered a new phase with the current one-week strike. Freight train employees across the country have been on strike since Monday afternoon and passenger services joined on Tuesday. The GDL (German train drivers' union) intends to continue the strike until Sunday morning.

After the strike was widely observed in the first two days, bringing the large majority of freight and passenger services to a halt, Deutsche Bahn head Rüdiger Grube suggested appointing the former state premier of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck, as an arbitrator.

GDL leader Klaus Weselsky rejected this proposal on Tuesday afternoon. He said at a rally in Cologne, "Nobody should assume that we are ending strike action at this point in time due to a PR-stunt from the chairman of the board." Grube's condition was that the GDL immediately call a halt to the strike.

At Frankfurt's main train station on Wednesday, striking train drivers and conductors, as well as passersby, commented on the latest developments in the strike.

"That's a total joke that they are now suggesting Platzeck, a prominent SPD [Social Democratic] politician, to us as an independent arbitrator," said a young conductor who had heard about Grube's offer, "when (SPD) Labour Minister Andrea Nahles is the one pushing through the collective bargaining law which aims to silence us."

He was referring to the contract bargaining law that Nahles is seeking to rush through parliament as quickly as possible. The law, which recognises only one agreement at each employer, is aimed at consolidating the trade unions organised in the German Trade Union confederation (DGB), turning them into a straitjacket

for employees. Every strike organised by the workers themselves would thus be illegal from the outset.

"They are attacking the right to strike of every worker with this law," stated train manager Sabine, who came to the train station to support her striking colleagues. She referred to German history, mentioning the destruction of democratic rights through the Hitler dictatorship and its emergency Enabling Law and said, "All workers' rights have only been won here in struggle against the resistance of big business and the politicians. It must be clear to everyone that democratic rights must be defended."

"I really hope that the train drivers prevail, that the GDL is allowed to raise demands for the rest of rail employees," Sabine continued. "We did not feel represented by the other trade union, the IVG (formerly Transnet). They completely abandoned us."

"This is about fundamental social demands," she explained further. "About shortened work weeks and better remuneration. As conductors, we can be compared to maids in a hotel room who work without a break. We're talking here about a 54-hour week. We are in the same trains as the train drivers and often have the same conditions. We also need more time to spend at home with our families."

"All members of trade unions should actually be in solidarity with us. But the main trade union bosses fully support this collective bargaining law, which shreds our rights. All that I can ask is, 'Who actually elected them?' The members?"

Her colleague interjected, "Nobody elected them. They paid for their right."

She then spoke about the example of Norbert Hansen (who in 2008 moved directly from leader of Transnet to human resources chief at Deutsche Bahn, earning millions in the process). "That says everything", she

said, “When a trade unionist like Hansen is sitting on the Deutsche Bahn board of management!”

GDL train driver Ingo Klett said, “The train drivers are just the most visible in public. But childcare workers are also on strike, postal workers, Postbank employees, the midwives were on strike, and lots of other workers are having to fight for their rights. There is severe social inequality in Germany, the entire country is affected. Workers are compelled to take to the streets and fight for their rights, because they can no longer make ends meet.”

Responding to a question on the latest German war preparations, Ingo said, “They are already in the midst of preparing for the next war. All of this just isn’t publicised in the media, but the situation is extremely unsettling. That’s just why it’s so important that we defend the right to strike.”

Michael, a young train driver, also backed the strike and explained its significance. “The main thing for us certainly isn’t money, but much more the working conditions,” he said. The important demands were shorter working hours, regulations on shifts, rest time and a clear restriction of overtime.

“There are constantly fewer people at work, many are leaving and fewer coming in”, Michael said. “That makes it very difficult to be fully present. I have to wake up at 2 a.m. to go to work and have very little free time. How can one have a social life? How can one plan a family? It doesn’t work, people are being worn out, and their health suffers.”

“All of this is supposedly necessary to function under conditions of brutal competition”, he added. “But the bosses have their own service cars and lead a life of luxury. It’s unbearable to hear about the bonuses and all of the enrichment. The money is there. Deutsche Bahn is making profits and many more people could be hired. Instead they want ever increasing profits.”

Michael explained that the contract bargaining demands also had to include other train employees, particularly yard engineers and the entire on-board staff. He said, “Yard engineers are the cheap train drivers. In principle, they work twice as much and get less pay. I did that job myself for a period of time.”

As before, it had not been made clear if the GDL train drivers were allowed to strike for these colleagues.

“It got a lot worse recently,” Michael said. “The shift plans are arriving at shorter notice. It’s a changing

game, and works only because of the good will of the train drivers and shift planners. Of course we know that there are workers who have it worse than we do, but if we give up, it will also get worse for them.”

During the discussions at the train station, passers-by and commuters regularly stopped to listen. One said, “I fully support the train drivers, hopefully they will prevail. Deutsche Bahn wants to force them to concede, and the costs will be transferred to the citizens in any case.

“People have to open their eyes and see what is going on here. The media have not been writing objectively for a long time. It isn’t press freedom when only the interests of one side are seen. The danger is that this new law is implemented, according to which only the large DGB trade unions can strike. We are already living in a surveillance state, so we don’t need a law that also bans strikes.”



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