

SEP in Germany participates in panel discussion on train drivers strike

Our correspondents
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Ulrich Rippert, National Secretary of the *Partei für Soziale Gleichheit* (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) and Frank Nachtigall, district leader of the train drivers' union (GDL) for the Berlin-Saxony-Brandenburg area, held a panel discussion on Friday at the local strike headquarters near the east train station in Berlin. They spoke about the tasks and perspectives of the train drivers' strike.

Around 80 people, mostly striking train drivers, listened attentively to the one-hour discussion, which was moderated by PSG member Christoph Dreier. The discussion sharply delineated the conflicting positions of the PSG and the GDL.

Ulrich Rippert stressed that the strike was confronted with political tasks, that the GDL would sell out the strike if it remained under the control and influence of its limited trade unionist perspective, and that the strike must become the beginning of a broader mobilization of the entire working class.

Frank Nachtigall rejected this. He insisted that the GDL was not responsible for major political questions and must limit itself to improving the situation for the GDL's 35,000 members.

To begin the discussion, Christoph Dreier asked why it was "that the government and the Bahn management have formed a united front with the DGB (German Trade Union Confederation) in order to attack the right to strike and launch an offensive against the train drivers."

The answers to this question immediately made clear the differences between Rippert's and Nachtigall's positions.

Nachtigall said the reason could be found in the coalition agreement of the Grand Coalition government. He referred to three points on which the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) and the SPD (Social Democratic Party) had all agreed. The minimum wage agreement and retirement at 63 were "the offspring of the SPD," he said. There also had to be something done for the employers' side, and so they have taken up the issue of contract unity, a project that was initiated in 2010 by Dieter Hundt, then president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, and DGB chair Michael Sommer.

In contrast, Ulrich Rippert said that the contract unity law was "a reaction to an ever sharper international crisis of the entire capitalist system and of the European Union." The government was reacting to this international crisis by seeking to intensify the exploitation of the working class. "The working conditions are not only being radically degraded in the Bahn, but all over. One's working life becomes almost unbearable."

This was mostly clearly shown in Greece, where the German government has systematically ruined an entire country, explained Rippert. "These decisions were made in the chancellor's office here in Berlin. If one wants to understand the character of this government, which is indeed a social democratic-conservative coalition, then one must look at Greece."

In addition, Rippert continued, the government has responded to the capitalist crisis with militarism and preparations for war. Last year, Social Democratic Party Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier declared that the time for military restraint in Germany was over. Germany must again become active worldwide and intervene independently. Since then, a systematic military buildup has taken place. The government funds the cost for this buildup through radical austerity measures.

"In order to suppress any opposition to the escalating crisis, exploitation and the resurgence of militarism and war, the right to strike is being attacked," said Rippert. This was the significance of the contract unity law, which is aimed at empowering the DGB unions to control and suppress any independent workers' movement.

One could only wage a successful struggle against the contract unity law by taking into account these international issues, Rippert said. A fundamental attack on the right to strike is now taking place. It was necessary to grasp that the confrontation, involving ten months of labor disputes and eight strike actions, was in conflict with the government and could not simply be carried out on a trade union basis.

"This is a political conflict that requires a political perspective, a political program and a political party,"

Rippert stressed. “That is why we say: the working class needs its own independent party. The strike must go beyond the narrow framework of the GDL and become the starting point for a broader political mobilization of the entire working class.”

Frank Nachtigall rejected any such political perspective. “We are a trade union, and we conduct trade union politics. We don’t involve ourselves in state politics,” he said. He admitted that the GDL could not be apolitical: “Whoever goes on strike in this country, whoever undertakes to interrupt train traffic in this country, cannot claim to be apolitical. But I really think that state politics, European politics, world politics is not and cannot be the task of the GDL.”

Nachtigall said, “Frankly, things are not so bad on the trade union landscape.” He said that he believed “we are giving a lead and encouraging others.” As proof, he added that the public service union Verdi organizes more strikes today than it did three or four years ago, and that a few people in charge had understood: “We have to get our people back out there.”

He agreed with one point: “In the last 20 years, many trade unions have forgotten why they are actually there, have contributed to the alignment of unions and policy, especially the fusion of the DGB and the SPD, so that one could not make reasonable contracts anymore.” Here he argued for “a reasonable separation.” He was, however, satisfied that “self-reform” could occur. That depended “on responsible citizens, citizens with common sense.”

In reference to the German constitution, on whose articles the GDL bases itself, Nachtigall stressed: “One changes the political landscape of this country by going to the ballot box and not by going on strike.”

Ulrich Rippert presented a completely different assessment of the trade unions. He posed the question: “Why is it that the unions have unashamedly turned into agents of management? Why is the government working so closely with the DGB to suppress any independent movement?”

He referred to former IG-Metall president Berthold Humber, who currently sits on the board of directors for Volkswagen, the second largest automotive company in the world, and Norbert Hansen, who went from chairman of the railway union Transnet to the board of Deutsche Bahn.

The reason for this transformation of the trade unions is not just the personal corruption of top officials, explained Rippert; it is a fundamental social transformation. The globalization of production meant that conditions in the labor market could no longer be nationally regulated. The “healthy competition” to which the government, leading economists and trade unionists always refer when they appeal for “modest” pay increases, is in fact a race to sink

wage levels in Germany to those paid in China, Romania and other countries. The national strategy of trade unions has reached a dead end.

It is no longer possible to improve society within the context of “social partnership” in a nationalist framework, said Rippert. “Today the trade unions no longer put pressure on the owners to improve the conditions of workers. Now the unions say: ‘We have to make sure that our companies remain competitive on the international market and that’s why, dear colleagues, we must cut jobs and worsen the sweatshop conditions at work.’”

The GDL is not immune to this development, Rippert said. He warned that the leadership of the GDL is not prepared to lead a struggle against the government: “Is the GDL able and ready to lead a confrontation with this government? My answer is: No. It is looking for a compromise. And do you know what compromise means? The strike will continue for perhaps a few more days, another limited strike may also take place, then they will say: ‘We’ve tried everything, we can only do so much, we’re going back to work with our heads held high.’ We know this sort of talk. A sell-out is justified and carried out as though it were the only thing to do.

“One cannot answer great social problems with petty solutions,” said Rippert. Today workers must confront the full extent of the social crisis.

He stressed that in the GDL strike, neither the Bahn management nor the government wanted a compromise because the defeat of this strike is intended to be the opening of a new round of social assaults on the entire working class. He concluded: “The strike must be expanded. It is necessary to establish committees whose task is to appeal to workers in other fields and in other areas of industry in order to prepare for a much broader political confrontation with the government. There is no other way.”

Following the panel discussion, many train drivers remained and spoke at length with Ulrich Rippert and other members of the PSG.



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