

German train drivers launch new strikes

Dietmar Henning
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The day after a walkout halted much of Germany's freight train traffic, thousands of train drivers struck the passenger lines run by state-owned Deutsche Bahn (DB) Wednesday morning. The strike is the ninth walkout called by the train drivers' union—Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer, or GDL—in the last 10 months and the third in 2015.

The GDL, which represents 20,000 train drivers, is calling for a 5 percent wage increase, a two-hour reduction in the workweek and the right to represent other sections of DB's 200,000-member workforce, including conductors and restaurant carriage workers. DB has countered with a 4.7 percent increase and one-time €1,000 bonus but has refused to allow the GDL to represent workers who are not engineers.

The union has accused the state-owned carrier of deliberately blocking an agreement and stalling until this Friday's Bundestag vote on a bill that would essentially bar smaller unions from calling strikes, limit their bargaining power and enforce what amounts to a one-union monopoly over DB rail workers. The DVG (Railway and Traffic Union), which is a member of the DGB (German Confederation of Unions), has long collaborated with the government assault on rail workers' jobs and conditions. The "contract unity" bill, which is expected to pass, would go into effect in July.

GDL head Claus Weselsky has not announced how long the current strike will last but indicated it would go longer than the six-day strike called by the union earlier this month. The GDL would announce the end of the strike 48 hours ahead of time, he said, but the walkout would continue over the busy Pentacost holiday this weekend. This would not be an indefinite strike, Weselsky said, making it clear the union had an end date and was committed to "moderation."

Ahead of the strike, the GDL and DB executive board representatives met for 20 hours of talks last Friday and Saturday. Bahn management cancelled further talks, the

GDL said. "While the GDL was still thinking over the offer from the employer at 5:30 PM, the negotiating delegation of the DB left the negotiating table."

The GDL has announced its willingness to abide by an arbitrator's proposals. A GDL press release states, "The contract negotiations carried out with the DB at the initiative of the GDL since midday on Friday were aimed at settling on intermediate results and on this basis reaching an arbitration agreement." The GDL has "even explicitly offered in writing" to enter into arbitration on the topic of pay increase, shortening of working time, limits to overtime and additional specific demands.

On Monday, the GDL said DB managers had no intention of reaching an agreement and "would only communicate with the GDL in an arbitration." In this way, the company abandoned any chance of an intermediate agreement and a subsequent resolution, Weselsky said.

The DB basically confirmed the accusations, saying there had been no "negotiation table" to walk away from, since the talks were informal, not official negotiations.

DB management refuses to give GDL drivers a separate wage contract. In 2008, the DVG negotiated a paltry wage agreement for about 3,000 workers it termed "locomotive drivers," splitting them off from other train drivers. The GDL is seeking a contract for all 20,000 train drivers as well as other DB workers.

Meanwhile, management, the government, businesses and the EVG are stepping up their campaign of provocations and denunciations of the GDL. DB personnel chief Ulrich Weber called the strike "irresponsible" and "without sense or necessity." Minister for Economic Affairs Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has called for arbitration along with Federal Transport Minister Alexander Dobrindt (Christian Social Union, CSU).

For its part, the EVG announced it was seeking a separate deal to strangle the GDL. “We have invited our bargaining committee to Berlin on Thursday,” the spokesperson of the EVG Uwe Reitz told the Berlin newspaper *Tagesspiegel*. “If the DB improves its offer we will have achieved our aim,” he said.

If the DB and its in-house union reach a wage agreement it would cover all categories of workers except for the train drivers and would essentially bar the GDL from recruiting new members. It is clear the DB wants to force train drivers to their knees, either through the outright capitulation of the GDL or by waiting for the “one company, one union” law to be enacted.

The law is aimed at killing off smaller unions by forbidding most of them from going on strike. The fact that it forbid strikes—in spite of the declarations to the contrary on the part of Minister of Employment Andrea Nahles (SPD)—is confirmed by the government’s answer to a question from a Green Party parliament member.

MP Beate Müller-Gemmeke asked whether the labor courts could, on the basis of the planned law, forbid a strike in the future on grounds that such an action was “excessive.” The Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Labor Anette Kramme (SPD) answered that the evaluation of a strike by a court “can reveal” that it “can be excessive, insofar as a wage contract is supposed to be enforced, whose content is not put into effect.” In other words, such a struggle can be banned if workers seek to resist a pro-company contract enforced by the EVG or any other union.

The six-day strike, which ended on May 10, was the longest since DB began opening its lines to private competitors. A crowded passenger train operated by one of those private companies, Westfalenbahn, hit a truck on a road crossing near the western German city of Osnabrück May 16, killing two people and injuring at least 20 others.

Only every second normally scheduled train was operational during the strike, which affected some 5.5 million riders each day. However, despite the repeated walkouts, which have more the character of steam-releasing operations, the GDL has opposed a broader mobilization of the working class against the coalition government and its program of austerity, privatization and other attacks.

Conditions for such a struggle are present as airline pilots, postal workers, hospital and childcare workers and others are determined to recoup income lost after the 2008 financial crash now that corporate profits and the stock markets have fully recovered. More than 350,000 workdays have been lost due to strikes so far this year, compared with 150,000 in all of 2014.

It is not possible to defeat the DB management and its government backers, however, on the basis of a trade union perspective. Above all workers in Germany, throughout Europe and the world are confronted with a political struggle against the capitalist governments and the profit system they defend.

As the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (the Socialist Equality Party in Germany) recently wrote, “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).”



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