

German train drivers' union calls off strike and agrees to arbitration

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The German train drivers' union (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer, or GDL) announced early Thursday morning that the strike it launched earlier in the week would be halted. The walkout that affected both freight and passenger rail traffic, was the ninth work stoppage in the current 10-month-long dispute.

The GDL had threatened to continue the strike over the busy Pentecost holiday weekend and extend it longer than the six-day strike it called earlier this month, the longest in the history of the state-owned Deutsche Bahn (DB) railway. The ending of the strike followed intensive discussions between the GDL and DB management, which also included Professor Klaus Bepler, former chief judge at the federal labor court.

In a press release, the GDL justified its action with the claim that both parties had agreed to “a contractual basis for a comprehensive pay agreement for train staff and at the same time a process of arbitration. “Prior to this, Deutsche Bahn management had basically refused to recognize the GDL, saying that settlements with other trade unions would have no bearing on reaching an agreement with GDL.

The GDL declared that it had achieved its key demand and would now be able to negotiate and conclude agreements not only for train drivers, but for “all its members among train staff at DB rail transport companies.”

However, DB management presented the details differently. Responding to requests for comment, DB head of communications Dagmar Kaiser stated, “Nothing fundamental has changed in our stance. We continue to strive as before for uniform pay agreements. We have not given up our position that there should not be first- and second-class workers.”

GDL district head for Berlin-Saxony-Brandenburg, Frank Nachtigall, told the WSW, “DB is of course trying to save face and deny the success of the GDL. But the

position is clear. To date, management has sought by all means to prevent us from reaching agreements not just for train drivers, but also for engine drivers and other professional groups of train staff. This ultimatum has now been removed, and that is a victory.”

For years, Nachtigall said, DB has shifted jobs from train drivers to so-called locomotive drivers, who, while doing the same work, are paid much worse and have far fewer regulations on working time. This “company internal wage-dumping” would now be eliminated, Nachtigall said.

Despite the bravado from the GDL it remains unknown precisely what agreement was reached. In fact, the GDL has thrown the fate of railway workers into the hands of arbitrators from two of Germany's capitalist parties.

Both parties agreed on arbitration and named leading politicians as arbitrators. For the DB, former Brandenburg state president Matthias Platzeck (Social Democrats, SPD) will be appointed an arbitrator, and for the GDL it will be Thuringia state president Bodo Ramelow from the Left Party.

Both Platzeck and Ramelow are representatives of the right wing of their respective parties and support policies of strict austerity at the expense of the working class. Platzeck governed Brandenburg at first in a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDU) and subsequently with the Left Party to impose savage budget cuts. In Thuringia, the Left Party-SPD-Green Party coalition is carrying out a major austerity program.

The GDL's appointment of Ramelow as an arbitrator is an ominous sign. During the 2007 train drivers' strike, he sharply attacked the GDL and accused it of abusing the train drivers' militancy to “enforce the independence of the GDL as the main strike goal.” This was “not acceptable,” Ramelow stated at the time, while defending the DGB (German Confederation of Trade Unions), which has a long record of collaborating with the

employers to destroy jobs, living standards and working conditions.

Ramelow is a typical pseudo-left representative of the trade union bureaucracy. He began his career in the trade, bank and insurance (HBV) trade union, one of the predecessors of the Verdi trade union. He went to eastern Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall and became chairman of the HBV in Thuringia and joined the Left Party.

The calling off of the strike by the GDL was not some negotiating tactic. The walkout was ended the day before the grand coalition of SPD/CDU in the Bundestag prepares to adopt the law on contract unity. The upper chamber of parliament—the Bundesrat—will then agree to the law as quickly as possible so it will go into effect before the summer holiday.

The “one company, one contract” bill would consolidate the control of the corporatist DGB union confederation over unionized workers in all private companies and public services. In the future, only DGB trade unions will have the right to conclude pay agreements, confirm their lengths and therefore enforce “labor peace.” With the support of works councils, even more strict controls on workers and other employees are to be established to suppress any collective resistance by workers.

Although the GDL has spoken out against the bill, it is opposed to any mobilization of the working class against the government. Instead of continuing the strike and calling mass demonstrations and other actions to unite workers from all sectors of the economy against the government, it is doing precisely the opposite. Instead it is using an essentially meaningless concession from DB management to break off the strike and signal to the government that the GDL is ready to support and work with it. This is under conditions in which growing sections of German workers, in the postal service, airlines, hospitals and child care centers, are coming into a growing conflict with the government and its austerity measures.

The contract unity bill is only a first step. It is the prelude to a massive assault on social and democratic rights, and is directly connected with the intensifying capitalist crisis internationally, and of the European Union. The German government is responding to this crisis with a major intensification of exploitation, the elimination of social provisions and the revival of German militarism.

Since leading government officials and German

President Joachim Gauck announced the end of “military restraint” last year, the military forces have been massively rearmed. As a result, major social and political class conflicts are unavoidable. The government is preparing major social cuts to secure billions for the military buildup. At the same time, core democratic rights are being eliminated to make it possible to deploy the German army in war zones in the face of popular opposition.

In a few weeks, on 13 June, the sixtieth anniversary of the formation of the postwar German army, an armed forces day with ceremonial celebrations will take place. Thousands of young officers and career advisers will be sent in to schools and job training centers to promote the military buildup and serving the so-called Fatherland.

By breaking off the strike, the GDL, led by Claus Weselsky, is seeking to block the development of a movement of the working class against the government. Weselsky has repeatedly demonstrated that the union has no intention of opposing the government and is only seeking state sanction for his union.

It is false to believe that a nationally based union that accepts the capitalist system can defend the interests of workers simply because it conducts a few more strikes and protests. The struggle to defend workers’ rights and historic achievements necessarily raises the question of political perspective, and on this issue the GDL is in full agreement with the DGB unions.

If the struggle of train drivers remains under the control of the GDL and subordinate to its nationalist perspective and craft trade unionism it will inevitably fail. The calling off of the strike will only serve as the prelude to defeat.

What is necessary is a political party that opposes capitalist profit with an international strategy and fights for a socialist program. That party is the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—the Socialist Equality Party in Germany).



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