

German train drivers' union agrees to strike ban effective until 2020

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A new agreement between Deutsche Bahn (DB) and the German train drivers' union (GDL) has far-reaching consequences. Most significantly, the GDL has agreed to a “binding arbitration settlement”—in effect, a strike ban—that will remain in effect until 2020.

The train drivers went on strike nine times during the yearlong contract dispute with Deutsche Bahn. In the process, they demonstrated the considerable economic and political power of a section of the working class. The train drivers brought passenger and freight trains to a halt several times, leading to bottlenecks and production losses in important businesses. That will now be prevented.

The *Handelsblatt* business paper immediately understood the central meaning of the comprehensive, 450-page agreement and rejoiced: “Finally, no more strikes!” The financial paper was not deceived by the 16 highly detailed individual agreements and immediately pointed to the central content of the contract. Strikes are contractually allowed in the railway until September 2016, after which they will effectively be banned until 2020.

For the duration of the new contract beginning September 30, 2016, a so-called “peace obligation” will prevail—i.e., rail workers will not be allowed to strike. Furthermore, the GDL has agreed that, until 2020, an arbitration process can be initiated by just one of the bargaining parties involved. Consequently, the executive board of the Deutsche Bahn can prevent a strike called by the GDL through compulsory arbitration.

Whether a strike can still be classified by the courts as consistent with such an agreement is doubtful.

The contract was not submitted to a vote by the train drivers. Instead, it is the result of binding arbitration prepared over the course of five weeks by mediators

Bodo Ramelow, the Left Party member who currently serves as premier of the state of Thuringia, and Matthias Platzeck, the former Social Democratic Party (SPD) premier of Brandenburg.

Railway personnel director Ulrich Weber said that he was especially pleased that “the threat of strikes is banned.” GDL leader Claus Weselsky emphatically thanked the two mediators and stressed that the GDL has reached all its important goals. It had been able to enter into a contract on behalf of its entire membership for the first time.

With the new contract, the GDL adopts the agreement already in place for the railway and transportation union (EVG), Deutsche Bahn's company union, which had already reached an agreement with DB at the end of May.

Now the GDL has bowed to the EVG. Beginning July 1, there is a 3.5 percent wage increase for train drivers, and another 1.6 percent will be added on May 1, 2016. With this, DB achieved one of its most important aims, namely establishing the same contract conditions for all workers in a single occupational group.

DB offered the GDL a few concessions that were probably unavoidable given the miserable working conditions. It is now stipulated that the number of permissible overtime hours will be limited to 80 hours per year. By the end of 2017, one third of the 3 million total overtime hours for train drivers will be eliminated. For the conductors, overtime hours will be reduced by 300,000 hours. The Bahn has committed to take on 300 more train drivers and 100 more conductors.

However, the reduction of the workweek will only begin in 2018. This will allow DB enough time, after the expiration of the contract with the EVG next year, to renegotiate, with the same terms applying to the GDL. EVG leader Alexander Kirchner has already

signalled his readiness to do so.

Kirchner and the EVG welcomed the arbitration agreement. “We welcome the complete adoption of our contract agreements in the contract with the GDL, through which the threatened contractual division of a single profession will be prevented,” explained Regina Rusch-Ziemba, head negotiator for the EVG, in a press release.

For its subordination to the DB and EVG, the GDL demanded that it be recognized as a “social partner,” i.e., that it be able to negotiate contracts for its entire membership. The Bahn has guaranteed this to the GDL. The arbitration agreement states that the contract unity law of the federal government will not be applied in the Bahn until 2020.

This arrangement is an obvious sham. The contract unity law—which allows the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) to function as a monopoly corporatist trade union—need not be enforced given that the GDL has voluntarily agreed not to deviate from the EVG contracts. The EVG is affiliated with the DGB, which has the closest ties to the state and the ruling class.

The capitulation of the GDL can only be understood against the background of a rapid intensification of the capitalist crisis in Europe and worldwide.

The German government reacted to the crisis by intensifying its attacks on workers in Germany and across Europe. Led by Germany, the EU is currently imposing brutal austerity in Greece as a prelude to an offensive by European governments against the entire European working class—including German workers. Working and living conditions are under relentless assault in the interests of the banks and big business.

At the same time, the government is reacting to the capitalist crisis with militarism and preparations for war. The systematic military build-up is intended to prepare the German military for the event that NATO’S growing threats of war against Russia and China turn into an open military conflict. The government is paying for the cost of military build-up with austerity measures.

In order to suppress opposition to war and social inequality, the right to strike is being restricted. That is the real significance of the contract unity law. With its help, the unions associated with the DGB are to be used to suppress and control every independent movement of

workers.

Under these conditions, the yearlong contract dispute of the train drivers and conductors turned into a political conflict. The nine strikes of the GDL members temporarily paralyzed the entire country. Weselsky and the GDL have now signalled to the government: The fighting strength of the train drivers will not be used against the demands of the ruling class.

With this agreement, Claus Weselsky and the GDL leadership take their place on the side of the government. Despite its conflicts with the DGB, the GDL is not fundamentally different from them. They all accept the capitalist system. In recent months it had already become clear that the GDL had no intention of leading a struggle against the government.

The *World Socialist Web Site* repeatedly warned that the train drivers’ fight was doomed to fail so long as it remained under the control of the GDL and was subordinated to its limited, nationalist perspective.

This was already demonstrated in the GDL’S calling-off of the last strike. Instead of expanding the fight beyond the railway, the GDL leadership broke off the strike after a single day, before the German parliament decided on the contract unity law, and agreed to arbitration. That the GDL chose the Left Party functionary Ramelow as a mediator spoke volumes. Ramelow belongs to the right wing of his party and, along with the SPD and the Greens, has enforced a drastic austerity program in Thuringia.

The GDL’S acceptance of the arbitration results and the standstill agreement contains important political lessons. The hope that it is possible to oppose the dictatorship of the DGB with a supposedly less corrupt and more militant union has proven to be baseless.



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