

Germany railway workers' union agrees to wage cuts at Deutsche Bahn

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29 September 2020

Together with the management of Deutsche Bahn AG and the transport minister, the EVG union supports the restructuring of the railways at the cost of the workforce.

In all the collective bargaining disputes currently taking place in Germany, the trade unions are playing a key role in pushing through low wages and the dismantling of social standards.

Public sector union Verdi has just stifled industrial action at Deutsche Post AG and agreed to a deal that can only be described as making a mockery of postal workers, couriers and those working in distribution. In the public service, so-called “warning strikes” are part of a set script. Verdi and the local authorities have already firmly planned the October sell-out.

Another telling example is the wage agreement at the national railways, Deutsche Bahn AG. On 17 September, the railway workers' union EVG quietly and secretly agreed a contract lasting until 2023 with the company. The contract covering 215,000 train conductors, railway workers and train drivers provides for “wage increases” of only 0.5 to 1.5 percent, which represent a reduction in real wages. Furthermore, the new agreement does not contain a single point that would contribute to better protection against the coronavirus pandemic.

The EVG had only demanded a wage increase of 1.5 percent, in contrast to 2018, when it had called for a 7.5 percent rise. The union agrees with Deutsche Bahn AG that it will save €2 billion in personnel costs within three years.

The deal was agreed at a meeting in the Ministry of Transport at the end of this May, attended by the Federal Minister of Transport Andreas Scheuer (Christian Social Union, CSU), the company executive board, the EVG trade union and the company works council. An “Alliance for our railways” was forged there, intended to restructure the highly indebted company as a global player on the world market.

The foul so-called “restructuring collective agreement,” which imposes the costs for this on the staff, was brought forward by several months. Only recently celebrated as “coronavirus heroes,” the railway workers, train drivers and conductors are now the ones who have to go without.

Worse still, they are being exposed to the risk of coronavirus infection in the worst possible way. The targets for economic recovery—full trains—are not compatible with social distancing on rail travel. Since the end of the holiday season, ICE and InterRegio trains have therefore been packed to the limit again.

Even the promised obligation for travellers to wear masks on trains is becoming increasingly lax. Train conductors, among them numerous colleagues with pre-existing conditions, are often confronted with thousands of different passengers every day, increasing the risk of infection.

Two conductors recently told newsweekly *Der Spiegel* what everyday life looks like for them. They are now officially obliged to check tickets again, just like before the pandemic, even in dangerously crowded trains.

One 48-year-old conductor reported, “I have stopped checking tickets, even if we are supposed to do it again in the meantime—because my health is important to me. I can't keep the [required social] distance because there are not 1.50 metres free between the rows of seats. I don't know who has what illnesses, and then there are all those returning from holiday. Nor do we know where to go to be safe on the train or how to maintain hygiene.”

Neither railway management nor EVG has taken these problems seriously for even a second. Instead, they are punishing employees by imposing wage cuts, even though the rampant shortage of personnel is constantly increasing workloads and overtime is often demanded. Since the privatised railways were broken up and smashed to pieces in the mid-1990s to launch the formerly state-owned company on the stock market, the situation for employees

has steadily deteriorated.

Now, management has announced a so-called “personnel offensive” and has launched a media campaign saying it wants to hire 25,000 new employees. But at what starting wages and conditions is not said. Instead, the union claims that the current collective agreement and the small increase is also an expression of solidarity with new hires.

EVG’s right-wing policies and its close collaboration with railway management and the federal government has been known for years. EVG’s forerunner, Transnet, had prepared the IPO of Deutsche Bahn together with the company before the international financial and economic crisis thwarted this plan. Since the 1994 railway reforms, the workforce has been halved with the help of the trade unions.

In all these attacks, the executive board has always relied on close cooperation with the works council and the so-called employee representatives on the supervisory board, who are handsomely rewarded for their complicity. The “Norbert Hansen case” is well known. In 2008, the former chairman of the railway workers’ union moved onto the management board as head of personnel and collected a million-euro salary for his services.

This is no exception. In the most recent collective bargaining, the EVG was also faced with a former trade union official on the employers’ side. The current head of personnel at Deutsche Bahn, Martin Seiler, began his career as a works council member at Deutsche Bundespost. After serving on the works council for over 15 years and later as an official of the postal workers’ union, or Verdi (United Services Union), he joined management and now pockets millions.

This corrupt milieu of grasping trade union bureaucrats, who sit on both sides of the bargaining table, is enforcing the constant deterioration of working conditions and imposing low wages.

Many disappointed EVG members have moved to the GdL (Train Drivers’ Union), which initially appeared to be a more militant union. But as the coronavirus crisis clearly shows, the GdL is also on the employers’ side.

It is not involved in the shameful “restructuring collective agreement,” but the main reason for this is that it has concluded its own contracts with the company until 2021. The GdL also supports the government’s position and takes a completely nationalist perspective.

When railway workers in France undertook a bitter strike for their rights a few months ago, the GdL leadership did not lift a finger to support them. Instead, it

is defending Deutsche Bahn AG against its French competitors.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) calls for workers to form action committees independent of the unions to prepare a general strike in defence of health and life. “It is urgent to mobilize the working class across in Europe and internationally in a general strike to halt the ongoing resurgence of COVID-19,” says a joint appeal by the SGP and its European sister parties, Socialist Equality Party (UK), Parti de l’égalité socialiste (France) and Sosyalist E’itlik (Turkey).

The statement describes the COVID-19 pandemic as “a trigger event, starkly revealing the political issues facing the international working class.” The trade union bureaucracy stands behind the back-to-work policies of the ruling class. The statement recalls that the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and the main trade union federations in France have explicitly supported the recent EU rescue package for the banks and large companies worth €750 billion. No trade union has distanced itself, even verbally, from the deadly EU policy of “herd immunity.”

This is why the European sections of the ICFI and its sympathising group in Turkey are calling for an “international political struggle against the capitalist system and a policy of mass death deliberately pursued by the financial aristocracy.” The statement concludes by saying, “The task now facing the growing mobilization and political radicalization of the working class in Europe is the struggle to seize the resources stolen by the ruling class in years of obscene bailouts, bring down the EU governments, overthrow the capitalist system, and replace the reactionary EU with the United Socialist States of Europe.”



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