

German train drivers union head calls for massive staff cuts

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26 March 2021

The chairman of the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL, Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer), Claus Weselsky, has called for massive staff cuts at the country's main rail company, Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Railways).

"With regard to personnel, Deutsche Bahn has far too many people on board, they mainly do projects involving self-employment, at least half of them are dispensable," Weselsky told *Der Tagesspiegel*, the daily newspaper, adding that in "general administration, many are kicking their heels in well-heated offices or in home office, while colleagues on the front line are keeping the shop going even during the pandemic."

Weselsky has made similar comments in other interviews. On the YouTube channel "Jung & Naiv," for instance, he claimed that among DB's 211,000 workers in Germany there were "more chiefs than Indians." For 20 years, he said, the administrative apparatus has been inflating, with nothing else to do but pressuring and controlling workers in the company while worsening their working conditions.

The 127,000 employees of DB outside of Germany are beyond Weselsky's circle of vision. If he had his way, DB would dump them as soon as possible.

In 2014 and 2015, many rail workers at Deutsche Bahn and other transport companies joined the GDL because they hoped it would fight against an unending spiral of wage cuts, staff reductions and increased work pressure. At the time, the GDL brought rail traffic to a standstill with a total of nine significant strikes. It was opposing the adoption of a contract agreement agreed to by the corporatist Railway and Transport Union (EVG, Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft) with railway management.

Since then, however, it has been shown time and again that the GDL is no alternative to the EVG—a member of the German Trade Union Federation, DGB. The GDL ended the contract dispute in 2015 by signing an agreement, which banned workers from taking industrial action for four years. In reality, the GDL's main concern was to win recognition from DB as a contract bargaining partner. At the beginning of 2019, the union agreed to a new contract with a duration of 29 months, which barely compensated for the inflation rate and obliged its members to refrain from strike action until February 2021.

Now the smaller union is again in conflict with DB management because, on the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EVG has brought forward contract negotiations planned for this month and had already agreed to a "restructuring contract" in September

2020. The deal provides for an increase in wages and salaries for the approximately 211,000 railway employees of just 0.5 to 1.5 percent until February 2023. The GDL had rejected an early contract agreement.

In the run-up to these developments, an agreement was struck between Germany's Transport Minister Andreas Scheuer (CSU, Christian Social Union), the DB executive, the EVG leadership and the DB group works council. In an "Alliance for our Railways," they decided last May to cut company personnel costs by two billion euros (\$US2.4 billion).

In the meantime, DB has announced that it will apply the Collective Bargaining Unity Act (TEG) for the first time next month. The law was passed by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-CSU-Social Democratic Party (SDP) grand coalition government in 2014 to prevent smaller unions like the GDL (or UfO and Cockpit at Lufthansa, the largest German airline) from going on strike. The act allows companies to deal solely with the union with the largest membership as contract partner.

According to Deutsche Bahn, both the EVG and the GDL are represented in 71 of the group's 300 different companies. In 55 of these companies, only the agreements with the EVG will be applied in the future, because the EVG has the most members, while in 16 companies' contracts will apply to the GDL. Around 38,000 DB employees are affected.

Once again, the GDL sees its status as contract partner in jeopardy. Weselsky has already indicated that the GDL is prepared to make concessions. "Of course, we would consider a reorganisation," he told *Der Tagesspiegel*. But for that, "a reorganisation plan would have to be presented." Apart from "colourful PowerPoint slides and rosy promises" nothing so far was on offer. Management had gambled badly, took off all over the world and had "no idea about how to run railways in this country."

Weselsky's restructuring plan is illustrated by his proposal to lay off half of all administrative staff and confirms that the GDL is just as reactionary as the EVG. It is obvious that a union that attacks other workers in its own company is also stabbing its own members in the back.

The reason for this cannot be found solely in the person of Weselsky but rather in the bankruptcy of the trade union perspective he represents. The unions regard capitalist relations to be the unalterable norm and the basis for their own activity. They seek to regulate wages and working conditions within the

framework of existing property relations and strictly reject any mobilisation of the working class against capitalism.

As long as the focus of production was concentrated within a national framework and the world economy expanded, such a trade union perspective was able to achieve some social improvements. As the size of the “cake” to be distributed became bigger, both profits and wages could rise. Such a state of affairs, however, has long since ceased to exist.

With globalisation—the growing dominance of transnational corporations and financial institutions—the size of the “cake” depends directly on the international competitiveness of each corporation, i.e., its ability to exploit workers to the hilt. Any social concession scares off investors, causes the stock price to fall and induces the corporations to relocate production to countries with lower wages.

The unions have responded by transforming themselves into co-managers, who defend the competitiveness of “their” company at the expense of the workforce. They blackmail workers, play one plant off against others and organise wage cuts and layoffs. In return, their officials and works councillors are well paid. A works council leader or union secretary earns several times as much as an ordinary production worker. The former workers at the Opel car plant in Bochum, in the steel industry and in many other sectors have all learnt this lesson the hard way.

As a consequence, executives’ salaries, dividends, share prices and the fortunes of billionaires have risen exponentially, while the situation for workers has sharply deteriorated. The railways are no exception.

Previously a director of the former state-owned company received a salary equivalent to that of a top civil servant. However, today’s board members draw corporate executives’ salaries and earn many times more. The contracts of company head Richard Lutz, Infrastructure Director Ronald Pofalla (CDU) and Passenger Transport Director Berthold Huber are to be extended this week and their salaries increased by 10 percent in 2023, despite the coronavirus crisis. Lutz would then receive 990,000 euros (before bonuses), Pofalla and Huber 715,000 euros each.

Weselsky regularly rages against the increase in management salaries, but as a trade unionist, member of the CDU and fierce opponent of socialism, he works closely with the employer. The only difference between him and other union bureaucrats is that he is even more narrow-minded. While mimicking the role of a militant train driver, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs leaves him cold. His more than two-hour appearance on the YouTube channel “Jung & Naiv” shows this particularly clearly.

Born in 1959, Weselsky worked as a train driver in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and praised the unification of Germany in 1989-90 and the introduction of capitalism into former Stalinist-run East Germany. He proudly described his first industrial action with the newly founded GDL-East, claiming in July 1990 that, with a short strike, his train drivers had ensured their wages would be converted 1:1 to West German currency instead of 2:1 as originally planned.

In fact, at that time all wages, pensions and living costs, such as rent, electricity, etc. were converted 1:1 by law. Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) wanted to avoid at all costs that the

reunification ratified on October 3, 1990 could be jeopardised by social struggles. What Weselsky conceals is the price the working class paid for this.

The Kohl government could afford the 1:1 exchange rate because most of the jobs in the former German Democratic Republic would soon be wiped out. At the time of reunification, 540,000 unemployed people were already registered in the former GDR, 1.8 million were on short-time work and 300,000 took early retirement.

The railways were not spared from this jobs massacre. The workforce of the East German Deutsche Reichsbahn shrank from 253,000 to 138,000 within two and a half years. At the time of the subsequent railway reform in 1994, there were still about 500,000 employees in rail transport in eastern and western Germany—today there are less than half that number.

Nevertheless, in the “Jung & Naiv” interview, Weselsky praised the introduction of capitalism in the GDR in the strongest terms. He had “very much welcomed the new legal system” in 1990, he said, and stressed that “Marx, Engels, that sounds so much like class struggle. And we don’t do that. That’s the very big difference.” He remains a member of the CDU, even though he differs with the party on its acceptance of the Collective Bargaining Unity Act.

Weselsky also explicitly welcomed members of the far-right Alternative for Germany into the GDL. It is a “democratically legitimate party,” so he rejects the exclusion of AfD members from the GDL. That would be a “turn away from the principle of a united union.”

In 2014, the WSW defended striking train drivers against the vicious offensive at that time by politicians and the media, but we already warned: “The strike must not be subordinated to the nationally limited perspective of the GDL as a sectional union. Instead, it must appeal to all those workers in Europe facing very similar problems. [...] In order to make the train drivers’ strike a success, it must be the beginning of a mobilisation of workers throughout Europe on the basis of an international socialist programme.”

This is even clearer today than it was seven years ago. The defence of jobs, wages and social rights requires a break with the trade unions and their limited, national capitalist perspective. It requires the building of independent action committees guided by a socialist perspective and networked internationally. Above all, it requires the building of a new, socialist party in the working class: the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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