

Deutsche Bahn: GDL union announces industrial action

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Industrial action is looming at Deutsche Bahn (DB) during the summer holidays. Train drivers and crews, who worked continuously during the coronavirus pandemic at great risk to their health and lives, now oppose also being asked to pay for the company's losses, as demanded by management.

The train drivers union (GDL), which claims to represent more than 80 percent of train drivers and 40 percent of guards and on-board catering staff, declared that the negotiations with Deutsche Bahn on June 8 had failed and announced industrial action.

Explaining the decision in a video, union leader Claus Weselsky said railway workers were not willing to accept "their company pensions simply being taken away, management imposing a pay freeze, and the executive board of this Deutsche Bahn AG, which works by tricking, deceiving and filling its pockets, demanding supposed solidarity from employees." The GDL would "not tolerate that we are to be fobbed off with zero euros in income increases in 2021 with constantly rising inflation."

However, the GDL has not yet announced any concrete action. It has neither called for protest strikes nor scheduled a ballot, which would be a prerequisite for a real strike.

Weselsky justified this by saying that "all decisions that now follow and involve industrial action must not only be carefully weighed up but—this is, unfortunately, the case—must also be secured in every legal respect." DB management is just waiting "to stop the first industrial action in court."

He is hoping that the railway board will come around after all or that the federal government will intervene. After all, Deutsche Bahn AG is wholly owned by the government. In his video, Weselsky, who is himself a Christian Democratic Union (CDU) member, explicitly appealed to the "responsibility of the owners" to put a stop to the management.

Moreover, the GDL's demands would in no way avoid a loss of real wages. It is only demanding a wage increase like the one the Verdi union imposed on 2.5 million federal and municipal employees last year, after weeks of warning

strikes—1.4 percent in 2020, a one-off coronavirus bonus in 2021 and 1.8 percent in 2022. The GDL has already scaled down the amount of the demanded bonus from the original 1,300 to 600 euros.

Speaking to Welt TV, Weselsky said, "From our point of view, a modest collective agreement is quite possible and, at the end of the day, industrial action doesn't have to happen, because everybody knows it can be done."

By breaking off collective bargaining, the GDL is responding to the enormous pressure from rail workers, who are being sacrificed on the altar of profit. For years, work pressures and stress have been growing, while pay has been getting worse and worse.

Originally, the railways were to be floated on the stock exchange. To this end, the then-SPD-Green Party federal government put manager Hartmut Mehdorn, who is notorious for his brutal restructuring methods, at the head of the company in 1999. In 2009, the IPO failed because of the global financial crisis. Mehdorn was forced to leave, but the consequences of the restructuring remained: broken infrastructure, unpunctual trains and chronic staff shortages contributing to unbearable work pressures.

Now, as in the auto industry and many other sectors, the coronavirus crisis serves as a pretext to increase the company's profitability through a new frontal attack on the workforce.

At the end of May 2020, the federal government, DB, the groupwide works council and the in-house trade union EVG founded an "Alliance for Our Railways" with the task of "managing the coronavirus damage in solidarity." In plain language: to pass it on to the employees. The GDL, which competes with the EVG, refused to join this alliance despite repeated requests.

The first result of the alliance was early collective bargaining. In October last year, the EVG signed a new collective agreement lasting 24 months, which provides for no wage increase at all for 2021 and a minimal wage increase of 0.5 to 1.5 percent for January 1, 2022, which given rising inflation means a massive loss of real wages.

The EVG celebrated it “as a great success to have committed DB AG to recruit at least 18,000 new employees per year also in future years.” But this number is the absolute minimum necessary to keep the railways functioning, given the high number of those retiring and its importance for achieving climate targets.

Since April this year, the railway has also been applying the so-called “collective bargaining unity law.” According to this, only the collective agreement of the trade union with the largest membership is applied in a company. The law was passed in 2015 to cut off smaller sectoral trade unions—GDL, Independent Flight Attendants Organisation (UfO), Vereinigung Cockpit (VC), etc.—which had gone on strike several times in that period.

DB recognises the GDL as the strongest union in only 16 of its 300 companies. The GDL has sued against its non-recognition in 13 cases. Last Friday, the Frankfurt labour court rejected the first three of these complaints.

Industrial action against the DB’s austerity dictates would meet with strong support throughout the working class. Whether in the auto and supply industries, in aviation or the public sector, workers everywhere face the same attacks. After the “profits before lives” policy claimed over 90,000 mostly avoidable coronavirus victims in Germany, the consequences of the crisis are now being used to make whole industrial sectors more profitable and to recoup the huge sums that flowed into the financial markets and large corporations at the expense of workers. Even an increase in the retirement age beyond 67 is already being discussed.

The media and the establishment political parties understand very well the importance of the conflict on the railways. They fear it could send a signal to wider layers of workers. That is why they immediately turned their attention on the railway workers.

As so often, the tabloid *Bild* took the lead. Under the headline “Is a power struggle going to ruin our summer holidays?,” the Springer rag repeated almost word for word a catalogue of lies that Deutsche Bahn had published in the form of a press release.

Bild left out one point, however, because it seemed too revealing. The DB statement says: “Incidentally, what the GDL chief says about executive bonuses is wrong. He claims that 1.5 billion euros could be saved through this. That is wrong, it would be about one-third.”

Even if one assumes that DB’s figures are correct—which we do not—the top executives would be collecting 500 million euros in bonuses in addition to their salaries, which already run into the high six-figure range! This could finance a far higher wage increase than the GDL is demanding.

The fight against the DB’s austerity dictates requires a clear strategy. Railway workers are in conflict with the

company board, the federal government, the in-house union EVG, the works council—and also with the GDL.

Despite its dispute with the EVG and its sometimes more radical language, the GDL also swears by “social partnership.” It has proven time and again that it is prepared to make any concession if only it is recognised by DB as a collective bargaining partner. This is already shown by its modest demand in the current collective bargaining dispute, which, like the agreement reached by the EVG, means a reduction in real wages.

In 2015, when many workers from other transport sectors joined the GDL because of its willingness to strike, it ended the dispute with DB by signing a four-year standstill agreement. Then, at the beginning of 2019, the GDL agreed to a 29-month wage settlement that barely compensated for inflation and included a no-strike clause, to run until February 2021.

Above all, its narrow-minded attitude as a “professionals” union stands in the way of a broader mobilisation of the working class, without which no strike can be won. Weselsky is even driving a wedge between the railway workers in operations and administration. In March, he told *Tagesspiegel*, “In the personnel area, DB has far too many people on board, they mainly do projects for self-employment, at least half of them are dispensable.”

The 127,000 employees of Deutsche Bahn AG outside Germany fall outside Weselsky’s circle of vision. If it were up to him, DB would get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Defending jobs, wages and social rights requires a break with the unions and their nationalist perspective. It requires building independent action committees guided by a socialist perspective and networking and uniting internationally.

This is what the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) are advocating. We invite all railway workers to contact us and discuss these issues with us and to support the SGP’s campaign in the upcoming general election.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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