

Train drivers begin nationwide strike in Germany

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Engine drivers, train conductors and workshop engineers at railway company Deutsche Bahn (DB) have begun a nationwide strike to defend themselves against wage cuts and growing work stress. A ballot showed 95 percent of its members in favour of strike action, the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) announced on Tuesday. Turnout was 70 percent. A 48-hour strike started Wednesday morning at two o'clock and ends Friday morning. In freight traffic, the strike already began on Tuesday evening at 7 p.m.

The strike is of great significance for workers in Germany and around the world, because railway workers are resisting DB management's attempts to pass on the costs of the coronavirus pandemic to them. DB is determined to impose a pay freeze for 2021—while management bonuses will rack up €500 million—something it has already stipulated in agreements with the much larger railway workers' and transport union (EVG).

DB's offer to GDL members only provides for a wage increase of 1.5 percent from January 2022, with a further 1.7 percent from March 2023, and a contract term of 40 months. Given the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent, this means a massive reduction in real wages. Inflation is predicted to rise further, with Bundesbank President Jens Weidmann expecting it could be as high as 5 percent by the end of the year.

Company pensions are also to be cut by up to two-thirds and duty rosters made more flexible in order to deploy staff on irregular shift work at even shorter notice than before.

As "essential" workers, train drivers, conductors, engineers and other rail workers have had to bear the full brunt of the pandemic for 18 months already. They can neither isolate themselves nor protect themselves reliably. This was also revealed by a study commissioned by DB and carried out by the Berlin Charité hospital.

DB and the media reported the study using misleading headlines such as "No sign of increased coronavirus risk among train staff." In reality, the study only shows that train conductors are not exposed to a higher risk of infection compared to train drivers or railway engineers. But overall, the infection rate is enormously high. According to the study, among a total of 944 railway employees tested, 80, or 8.5 percent, were found to have had an acute coronavirus infection

within eight months!

Although railway workers are among the main victims of the virus, the DB Executive Board is cynically using the pandemic to denounce the strikers as "lacking solidarity." The strikes are "completely unnecessary and excessive," commented Martin Seiler, DB board member for human resources and legal affairs. "As Deutsche Bahn, we are in the midst of the company's biggest economic crisis and have suffered additional damage in recent weeks."

"The room for manoeuvre in this round of collective bargaining is set by the pandemic," stated Florian Weh, chief executive of the German Railway Employers' Association (AGV Move), which is leading the collective bargaining.

As usual, the right-wing tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* was particularly blatant with its lurid headlines: "Travel chaos looms!" and "An attack on the whole country." In a lying appeal, it attacked GDL leader Claus Weselsky from the right: "This strike is lacking solidarity, Mr. GDL boss!"

"In the midst of the pandemic and in the middle of the holiday season," train drivers could not expect any sympathy, and the health of travellers was "more important than quick wage increases," *Bild* wrote. "The strike comes at the wrong time and is becoming a health risk"; it meant "danger from contagions shortly before a possible fourth wave."

Such statements reek of boundless cynicism. Since the beginning of the pandemic, *Bild-Zeitung* has been the loudest proponent of the official herd immunity policy and of placing profits before lives. It has organised a veritable smear campaign against serious virologists such as Dr Christian Drosten.

The GDL strike is meeting with great sympathy among all railway workers and throughout the working class. As Weselsky reported at the press conference on Tuesday, "even many civil servants and colleagues from DB companies where the GDL has not even held a strike ballot have expressed their solidarity".

A train driver taking part in the strike said on twitter that the opposition of the political establishment to a halt in rail traffic during the "lockdown" indicates that it is "an essential job that I am doing. ... But now to strike for at least inflation compensation? No, that's taking hostages and being anti-social."

He spoke for many workers when he added, “A large part of the net wage is tax-free supplements. Sick leave? Holidays? Then it all falls away. If I become unemployed or long-term sick tomorrow, I go home with a triple digit [pay check].”

The reason for the barrage in the bourgeois media against the strike is the great sympathy for the strike in the working class. Any industrial action against the austerity dictates of DB, the government or corporations could send a signal and set off a chain reaction.

The pandemic has already caused more than 92,000 mostly preventable deaths in Germany. But governments at the federal and state level and business leaders have not only continued their profits-before-lives policies, but are using the pandemic as a pretext to step up attack on wages and jobs everywhere—at schools, day-care centres, hospitals, bus companies and airports, in the auto and metal industries.

Railway workers face a struggle on several fronts. They face not only DB management and the federal government, which owns 100 percent of Deutsche Bahn, but also the main EVG trade union, which is in the pocket of management and functions as a company union.

To successfully oppose the dictates of DB, railway workers must understand that the GDL too does not represent their interests. To make the strike a success, they must organise themselves into independent rank-and-file committees, reaching out to other transport workers and the whole German and international working class to wage a common struggle against job insecurity, wage theft and job cuts.

The GDL in its present form emerged from a factional conflict with the EVG. To fight against the endless spiral of wage and staff cuts that the EVG helps organise, more and more train drivers and then train conductors and other railway workers have joined the GDL since 2008. The GDL organised several rail strikes, in 2008 and 2014–2015.

However, the GDL is not prepared to launch an all-out strike and take up the necessary political fight against the government, which cannot tolerate a major rail strike, especially during the present election campaign. Claus Weselsky, himself a Christian Democrat (CDU) member, appealed to Federal Transport Minister Andreas Scheuer (Christian Social Union, CSU) at Tuesday’s press conference to relent with an “improved, negotiable offer.” Now was “the time to scrap the sham offers and put your money where your mouth is.”

Weselsky assured *Tagesspiegel*: “Of course, we would not close our minds to restructuring,” and linked this to the proposal to lay off half the administrative staff. Thus, instead of uniting all railway employees, the union is playing off one section of workers against another.

The GDL ended the dispute in 2015 by signing a four-year sellout agreement, and then agreed to a contract at the beginning of 2019 with a duration of 29 months, which barely compensated for the rate of inflation.

Its current demands are also not likely to improve the situation of railway workers. Its wage demand, like DB’s offer, is far below the rate of inflation. The GDL is demanding an increase of 1.4 percent from retroactive to the beginning of April, with a minimum increase of at least €50, a coronavirus allowance of €600 in 2021, and a further across-the-board wage increase of 1.8 percent on April 1, 2022, with a 28-month contract term instead of 40.

The GDL’s fight against the EVG is not progressive. Much of its “militancy” is because DB has been competing for membership with the EVG by applying the so-called Contract Unity Law (TEG). This was introduced by the grand coalition under the auspices of the SPD to protect the major unions against competition from sectoral unions such as GDL, or UFO and Vereinigung Cockpit in air travel, Marburger Bund (doctors), etc.

The TEG stipulates that in a company with several trade unions, only the collective agreement reached by the trade union with the largest membership is applicable. The GDL is fighting for a majority of members in 71 out of 300 railway companies, and as Weselsky explained, it has gained over 3,000 new members in the last six months. But DB will only grant it collective bargaining rights in 16 companies. It is taking legal action in another 18, but four of the actions have so far failed in court.

Like the EVG, the GDL is expressly committed to the corporatist policy of “social partnership.” If it is recognised as a “social partner,” it is prepared—like the EVG—to agree any shabby deal, as the 2015 and 2019 contracts have shown. It is also prepared to reach an accommodation with the EVG, as Weselsky made clear in an interview with the organisation “arbeitsunrecht.”

He promised that the GDL explicitly only wanted to represent “direct railway staff.” He said: “We are not talking about companies that are outside railway segments, we are not talking about [logistics arm] DB Schenker, for example. That is clearly the territory of our colleagues from Verdi, with whom we have no stress and no quarrel and do not hunt each other’s members, but maintain a peaceful coexistence.”



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