

Striking railway workers in Germany: “The company wants to destroy our achievements”

Our reporters
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Railway workers are on a nationwide strike until 2 a.m. on Friday. They are resisting Deutsche Bahn (DB) passing the costs of the pandemic on to railway staff.

DB management is not only refusing to provide the minimum necessary conditions to protect staff from Sars-CoV-2, but is using the pandemic to attack wages, shift rotas and achievements head-on. A pay freeze for 2021 means a cut in real wages, given the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent. Even company pensions are under attack.

Striking train drivers and conductors at Berlin’s Ostbahnhof and Frankfurt’s Hauptbahnhof talked to correspondents of the *World Socialist Web Site* about what all this means for them.

In Frankfurt, pickets have been standing in front of the station since half-past five in the morning. “So far we’ve had very good encouragement from passers-by,” reports train driver Mike. “Maybe the pandemic is also causing many workers to think it’s good that someone is finally resisting.” Like the rest of the group, he confirms, “We haven’t seen a penny in coronavirus bonuses here.”

A young train driver says, “The management and the media are trying to create a mood against us with the argument: ‘You still have your secure job despite coronavirus, why are you unhappy?’ But we had to carry on working under conditions of coronavirus when others could protect themselves by working from home. That was a terrible time. For us train drivers, there wasn’t even anything to eat at the station. We had colleagues with coronavirus infections. Now, after all this time, they come up with the offer that we can get vaccinated for free—it’s ridiculous. We’ve all done that privately.”

A GDL union strike leader, Bernd Steindorf, a railway worker for 47 years and train driver for 40 confirms, “We went through the whole coronavirus period, for 18 months. Now the DB board is telling us: ‘We have no more money, you have to tighten your belts.’ At the same time, three and a half thousand managers are getting €60,000 each in bonuses alone. None of us earns that much.”

In Berlin, train drivers reported that conditions were so

hard that many who start training as drivers quit in disappointment. “We even had pilots among us who were made redundant because of the crisis in air traffic and then tried to train as engine drivers. They all left again after seeing how hard our working conditions are.”

Strikers everywhere insist it is not just about money, but that they are demanding better, more humane conditions. This was also confirmed in Frankfurt by two train drivers, both named Sabine.

Sabine (1), who has been with the railway for 16 years, says, “In every company, there are good and bad times. But when it’s bad, you must stick together. Conditions should be improved, not worsened. It’s also about recognition and appreciation of employees, we don’t feel anything of that.”

“We’ve been working through two years in a state of emergency,” she adds, “and many of us have had an infection. But none of that counts for anything.” Her colleague explains, “It’s not just about money for us, it’s also about our pension provision—after all, DB even wants to attack our company pension! It’s about our health.”

She explains, “Our work is what is called ‘irregular rotating service.’ Most people can’t cope with regular alternating shifts in the long run, but we often have early, late and night shifts in one week. And as an engine driver, you always have to be 100 percent alert! None of us can sleep properly any more.”

She confirms, “For example, I would have several early shifts this week, then a long day and night shift from Sunday to Monday.” Her colleague adds, “There’s a limit to everything.” A co-worker says, “Organising a private life is super-super-difficult.”

Bernd Steindorf also confirms these statements. “As a train driver, you work rotating shifts, around the clock, including Saturday-Sunday and public holidays.” He adds that the work has become much more hectic in recent years. “Today, the shifts are timed to the minute: 10 hours 38 minutes, or 11 hours 27 minutes. That includes a three-quarter hour break.” Colleagues “are amazed at the creativity of management in creating rosters every time the

timetable changes. It's really a matter of minutes."

Family definitely falls by the wayside, he continues: "Quite a few years ago, we were promised they would hire 1,000 train drivers, but we haven't seen them to this day." In Germany, he says, train drivers had the longest working lives in Europe. "We are supposed to work until we're 67, but nobody can keep it up!"

They all confirm that a pay freeze is simply unacceptable. Train drivers and conductors are paid extremely poorly despite their responsible and challenging work, so that it is barely enough for the bare necessities, for example, to be able to finance a flat in Frankfurt am Main.

An older train driver from Saxony says, "Frankfurt is no longer a residential city, only a city for people with a fat wallet. We are in the bottom third in the salary survey for Germany, which is a disgrace for such a country, measured against the responsibility we have. I live in Saxony, but I have accommodation in Frankfurt, a 'flat in tin hut city,' also called the corrugated iron quarter [meaning a pile of shipping containers for railway workers at Frankfurt's Galluswarte]."

One picket reports living in an old railway workers' housing estate in Frankfurt, "It was cheap. But the Social Democrats sold it to [real estate company] Vonovia."

Train driver Stefan, who has been working for 12 years, says, "You can't get an affordable flat in Frankfurt. For a while, there was a lot of talk about a conurbation allowance for Frankfurt, and in the 1990s there was probably something like that, but not anymore. But we can't move to the surrounding area at all, because we sometimes start work at 2:40 a.m. or end our shift at 3:10 a.m. With my salary, I could probably live in luxury in Leipzig, but not in Frankfurt am Main."

Stefan then explains what the strike is about for many train drivers, and that DB is determined to take away the gains made by the last strikes in 2008 and 2014-2015.

Deutsche Bahn is so far the only large company to apply the Collective Bargaining Unity Act (TEG) since April 2021. This means that in each company, only contracts agreed by the union with the most members are applicable. The GDL, which is currently leading the strike, developed out of the conflict with the main Railway and Transport Workers' Union (EVG), which is affiliated to the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) and cooperates closely with DB.

Stefan explains, "In terms of pay and being able to plan your shifts, the GDL has achieved a lot with the strikes we have led. Before the last big strike, we couldn't keep up with the duty rosters at all and we were being deployed indiscriminately. At that time, I didn't know on day A where and what I would be working on days B and C. I

didn't know what I would be working on. After the strike, we were granted 'annual rest day planning,' which maps out the legal rest days we are entitled to a year ahead. Even today, although there are shift changes, we are only given 48 hours' notice. Still, that was a tangible improvement that they now want to take away from us."

He believes that DB is using the expiry of a contract "as a welcome opportunity to get rid of the unloved GDL."

Bernd Steindorf adds, "We want to keep our old collective agreement, it was simply much better than what DB is negotiating with their in-house union [EVG]. We also have better protection."

Stefan concludes, "DB wants to destroy all the achievements that we have fought for."

This is also confirmed in the discussion by Marianne Arens, a Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) election candidate in Hesse. "What you describe is correct, but it is not an isolated case," she said. "Not only Deutsche Bahn but also other big corporations and the government are using the pandemic to smash up the gains of the working class. That is why your strike is so important."

She reported about the struggle at Frankfurt airport, where WISAG ground workers had even gone on hunger strike against their dismissal. "The workers left Verdi because the union did not defend them. The GDL too is also not prepared to go on an all-out strike and take up the necessary political struggle against the government, which, as the owner of DB, is fully behind management and the social attacks."

This was already shown by the GDL's demands, Arens continued: "The GDL is merely calling for a small wage increase that will not even compensate for inflation. It accepts the capitalist framework of 'social partnership,' the law on collective bargaining unity and issues desperate appeals to the grand coalition government and Federal Transport Minister Andreas Scheuer."

For the strike to be a success, she said, workers now needed a clear strategy: "You need to organise yourselves into independent rank-and-file committees that will take the strike away from the GDL leadership, expand it and organise support among other transport workers and the whole German and international working class."



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