

Striking train drivers in Germany: “The system has been cut to the bone”

Our reporters
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Last week, train drivers and conductors went on a two-day strike which paralysed large parts of the German railway system. They are resisting the attempts to shunt onto them the costs of the coronavirus pandemic. Railway workers confront not only the railway operator Deutsche Bahn (DB) but also the federal government, which owns 100 percent of DB, the main railway and transport union (EVG) and the limited perspective of the sectoral train drivers’ union (GDL).

In Hesse, the Rhein-Main S-Bahn commuter rail system also went on strike on Wednesday. Two young train drivers, Sebastian and Damian, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* what they do and the responsibility that rests on them. “There are often a good 1,000 passengers on a train, and each train is run by just one driver alone.” And the shifts were long and gruelling.

Damian explained, “We really enjoy the work, but the shift changes are exhausting. We have very mixed shifts, for example, four days late shift, then three days night shift and then two days off. The times are also different, and each shift starts at a different time. We can never settle into a set rhythm.”

Significantly, Damian’s last shift before the strike ended at 01:54 that night, six minutes before the strike started. Sebastian says, “For society, it is a given that a train will come at three or four in the morning. For us, it means even before that we walk across the tracks in the dark, in the wind and weather, to pick up the train and prepare it. Let’s say I must start a train at 04:15, then I’m already at the station at 03:00 to prepare everything because I’m responsible for the safety of the passengers and I have to check everything to make sure it works. On top of that, there’s my own travel time, which is not counted as paid working time.”

“The coronavirus is not over even now,” Damian pointed out. “We should be better supported in every way. After all, we had to drive trains in lockdown—you can’t run a locomotive from your home. We also had train drivers who got infected, but it was not supposed to become public knowledge. They didn’t want the train operations shut down.”

The two explained the need to make their strike a success this time. A massive public relations campaign is underway against the GDL, they say. “There was no negotiation about the demands, but everything boiled down to the strike, and DB

obviously prepared well for it. Now they are saying, it’s the GDL’s fault, they’re ‘the bad guys’.”

The grand coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD) has furnished DB with the Collective Bargaining Unity Act (TEG), which hands the largest unions in each industry a virtual monopoly over collective bargaining agreements, and calls into question basic rights such as the right to strike and the right to organise.

For train drivers, the application of the TEG threatens important gains they have won in previous strikes led by the GDL. However, the GDL is not prepared to conduct a political struggle against these attacks and extend the strike because it accepts the capitalist framework of “social partnership.” Although DB has not been prepared to make any concessions so far, the GDL has ended the strike again for the time being.

Damian explains what it would mean if the EVG collective agreement applied to them all. “We train drivers today have an annual roster plan that tells us when our rest days are, when we have time off. And also, it says approximately what kind of shift we have on each day—although that can always change at short notice. That was a success of the last strikes. But if the TEG is applied, all that will be in question again.” His colleague adds, “Then shifts might be planned every week again, which would be much more difficult for us.”

“If that happens,” Damian reflects, “there will definitely be even more fierce strikes. If we lose these rights, then all the previous strikes will have been for nothing. That would be a huge step backwards, then we would have to start all over again.”

“We are all part of one big operation, even if it now consists of 250-300 different limited companies due to privatisation.” Both drivers supported the program of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) to build independent action committees for workers in different workplaces and industries to establish lines of communication among themselves and to broaden the struggle. “We all need to stick together as railway workers. We are also for a common struggle across national borders, together with French SNCF colleagues.”

Discussions with train drivers and conductors in Berlin

In Berlin, too, it is becoming increasingly clear to many train drivers and conductors that they can only win their struggle if they band together for a political struggle, which the GDL, just like the EVG, is not prepared for.

Speaking to WSWS reporters after the Berlin strike rally, train driver Sonja said she wanted to send a message to the Frankfurt railway workers, “Hang in there and keep fighting!” She thought it was very important for railway workers to unite across Germany. Workers lack active contact between the different centres and that there were no joint online events where they could discuss problems and make decisions, she said.

Lukas and Marcel, two train drivers who recently finished their training at subsidiary DB Regio, which operates regional and commuter services, pointed out that Deutsche Bahn even wants to attack company pensions. “It used to contribute 150 euros a month. Now it is to be cut by 50 euros. For newly recruited railway workers it is even to be abolished altogether,” says Marcel.

DB had deliberately provoked the conflict with the GDL. “At the private companies ODEG, Transdev and Netinera, which operate regional routes, the GDL was able to simply push through the same demands that are now being rejected by DB,” said Lukas. At the same time, the GDL’s demand for a 1.4 percent wage increase for this year is extremely modest and does not even cover inflation. They said that the GDL justifies this by saying that they are only asking for the same increase that is paid in the public sector, so as not to provoke unnecessary conflict.

“The more correct decision, however,” interjects Martin, a long-distance train driver, “would be to raise wage levels above the rate of inflation, in the public service, too!”

Many problems, the train drivers explained, had arisen because DB has been split up into many subdivisions, all of which were being shrunk in terms of personnel to make a profit. The next step would probably be to privatise the sub-sectors, including the repair and maintenance of trains. Since German reunification in 1991, a rigorous cost-cutting plan had been introduced, entire lines closed down, which now causes many delays. The Buch-Bernau S-Bahn line is now only single-track. Especially in long-distance traffic, delays occur when an Intercity Express (ICE) train has to wait for a freight train on the same track to pass, because the parallel alternative track had been shut down.

Three older S-Bahn train drivers had learned their trade in former East Germany (GDR), working for the Deutsche Reichsbahn. Andreas (with the railways since 1987), Thomas (since 1990) and Mario (S-Bahn driver since 1996) confirm that working conditions were much better back then. The railway was one of the most important companies in the GDR, which

ensured that the workplace was safe and working conditions were reliable, with shift schedules fixed long in advance and sufficient staff. “After reunification, the West’s system was adopted,” said Thomas.

Since being launched on the stock exchange, working conditions have deteriorated drastically. At the S-Bahn, shift schedules run for about 6 to 8 weeks, divided either into early, late and night shifts, or a day shift that can last from 7 am to 6 pm. “There are breaks in between, but you can’t do much in them,” Mario explains. “If you add the commute to and from work, it’s a long day. Some train drivers commute from Saxony or Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, every day.” Andreas interjected, “But most of the stress comes from being on our own as S-Bahn drivers.”

Train conductors or even platform staff were systematically cut back about 15 years ago. “If a wheelchair user needs assistance getting on and off the train, I have to secure the train, get off, adjust the floor plate and dismantle it again. This often causes delays, and the following train is then also affected because it cannot enter the station. Sometimes the delayed train then has to leave the regular service route for one that leads out of Berlin. In this case, the driver must ask all passengers to leave the train. There is no assistance from a conductor or supervisor on the platforms.”

A train manager on long-distance services explains, “The big reduction in staff was justified a few years ago by setting up a ‘DB App’ that allows passengers to check-in themselves when they are on the train. Staff were cut before the app even existed and the result is that very few passengers check-in themselves. I have two colleagues who are train conductors and look after the 12 cars of an ICE train. When passengers need help, they are completely overwhelmed.”

“Mr Lutz, the head of DB, got a ten percent salary increase, which is about 90,000 euros a year. This increase is more than double what some railway workers earn in a year,” one of the GDL pickets grumbles. Thomas, the S-Bahn driver, sums up the problem, “Since the railways were taken over by the West in the 90s, the system has been run down to the bone. The transport system, which the population needs, which is part of the provision of public services, has been cut to the bone. Because it’s all about profit.”



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