

What way forward in the rail strike?

Socialist Equality Party Germany
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The strike by German railway workers last week demonstrated that it is possible to take a stand against the management of German Rail (DB) and the German government, which backs it. After a 95 percent majority voted in favour of strike action in a ballot held by the train drivers' union, the GDL, three-quarters of long-distance services, 60 percent of local services and 300 goods trains were brought to a standstill throughout Germany last Thursday and Friday.

This does not mean, however, that the train drivers have been victorious. The DB management, supported by a largely hostile press, has so far stubbornly refused to make a new offer. The German Transport Minister Andreas Scheuer (Christian Social Union) is pushing for the intervention of a mediator in order to sabotage the strike.

To win the strike, railway workers need to be clear about some basic issues. They need to understand who they are up against and what the strike is about.

Victory requires the mobilisation of the whole working class

The offensive undertaken by the rail management, involving cuts to wages and pensions and growing stress at work, is part of a general attack on the entire working class. Rail workers are to be made an example of for precisely this reason. The strike, therefore, deserves the solidarity of all workers.

For many years, a tiny minority has been enriching itself at the expense of the majority of the population. Encouraged by the anti-welfare Hartz laws and other government measures, a huge low-wage sector has emerged in Germany, which is being used as a lever against all other workers. Wages lag behind inflation and pressure at work is continually increasing. In the railways, irregular shift work is ruinous to health and makes any normal family life impossible.

These attacks have further intensified with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic. In Germany alone, over 90,000 people have died from the pandemic due to the government's refusal to impose a comprehensive lockdown. To keep profits flowing, schools and factories remain open. At the same time, the government has awarded hundreds of billions of euros of taxpayers' money to the banks and major corporations.

As a result, share prices are climbing from one record to the next. On Friday, the Dax index reached a new historic high of 16,000 points. German companies are raking in huge profits.

Volkswagen made a record profit of almost €11.4 billion in the first half of this year. Daimler, Stellantis, Adidas, Deutsche Post, SAP and Siemens also reported profits in the billions. The profits of all Dax companies reached its highest-ever level in the first quarter of 2021.

And workers are paying the price. The corporations are mounting a frontal attack. Their greed is insatiable. Daimler and Continental have both announced 30,000 job cuts.

The same process is underway at the railways. While the rail management awards itself bonuses of €500 million, it is offering its employees no increase this year followed by a wage increase of 3.2 percent spread over 40 months. With the current inflation rate of between 4-5 percent, this corresponds to a real wage reduction of about 10 percent by the end of the contract! In addition, the company wants to lower company pensions and introduce even tougher shift schedules.

The rail management and the entire ruling class know that a victory for railway workers would set off a chain reaction. Millions of workers are following the rail strike with great sympathy and are ready to take up action themselves.

Conversely, rail workers can only win their strike by mobilising support across the working class. What is needed is a comprehensive, indefinite strike as part of a political struggle against the government. If the strike remains isolated, the government will move to strangle it.

For the first time, the management of DB, which is 100 percent owned by the German government, is activating the law on Collective Bargaining Unity. The law was passed in 2015 to explicitly prevent strikes by smaller trade unions, such as the GDL or Ufo and Cockpit (both air travel unions), and ensure a monopoly over workers by the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), which no longer represents workers, but is rather a tool of the companies to oppress workforces.

In the case of the railways, the DGB rail union, the EVG, had already concluded an "Alliance for our Railways" with the government and DB management in May last year, passing on the consequences of the coronavirus crisis to workers. In October, the EVG signed an early contract agreement with a zero increase for the current year, which now serves as a blueprint for the latest offensive against train drivers.

The leadership of the strike cannot be left in the hands of the GDL

The GDL is not prepared to wage the type of broad struggle necessary for the strike to succeed. Despite its differences with the EVG, the GDL is also committed to Germany's system of "social partnership" and cooperation with the government. GDL leader Claus Weselsky is even a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union.

Weselsky has proven time and again in the past that he is ready to strike a foul compromise on the condition the GDL is recognised by the railways as its main contract bargaining partner. In 2015, for example, the GDL signed a four-year no-strike agreement after many workers from other transport sectors joined the union due to the GDL's readiness to strike at that time. Then, in early 2019, the GDL agreed a wage settlement that barely compensated for inflation and banned any strike action until February 2021. Even now, the union's current demand is barely higher than the DB offer and is well below the rate of inflation.

Above all, the GDL is not prepared to extend the industrial action and take a stand against the government. In his latest podcast, Weselsky stressed that the GDL was not conducting a "political strike." He said that it fully accepts the law on Collective Bargaining Unity (Tarifeinheitgesetz, TEG) and was limiting its campaign to acquiring majorities in the various rail depots.

The GDL had decided in spring, he said, "that there can only be one path for this organisation: acknowledgement of the TEG as a fact, and the creation of majorities in all depots that are key to the railway system. That is our objective. No one can forbid us to do that, our objective is not political, it is in line with our function as a trade union."

The narrow-minded attitude of the GDL as a professional union is an obstacle to any broader mobilisation of the working class without which no strike can be won. Weselsky not only refuses to appeal to workers in other companies and countries, he even fosters divisions between rail workers by lumping all administrative employees together with the company's arrogant management. He told the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper in March that more than half of all clerical employees were "expendable."

Build independent action committees

The SGP proposes the setting up of independent action committees of rail workers to mobilise the necessary support and make their struggle a success.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the SGP is its German section, launched the International Workers' Alliance of Action Committees on May 1 to coordinate struggles in different factories, industries and countries.

The founding call states that the International Workers Alliance will "work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every

expression of resistance. The Alliance will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle..."

The importance of this initiative has already been confirmed in practice. For example, workers at Volvo Trucks in Virginia (USA) have formed an action committee and fought against both the global corporation and the United Auto Workers union (UAW). On three separate occasions, the 3,000 Volvo workers rejected UAW contracts with Volvo that involved wage cuts and worsened working conditions. The committee also inspired workers to take action in other plants of the global company, in the US, Belgium and Australia.

Workers at the German airport services company WISAG also took independent action when the company laid off 230 long-serving workers at Frankfurt airport and replaced them with low-wage workers. The German service workers union Verdi and its works council backed the management action. The WISAG workers therefore founded an independent action committee to coordinate and organise their struggle.

Support the SGP's election campaign

Building a network of independent action committees is essential to defend social gains and rights. It is no substitute, however, for building a party to represent workers' interests. Serious practical steps require a programme and principles. To this end a socialist party must be built in the working class.

The capitalist economic order is bankrupt. It produces only inequality, exploitation, death, war and dictatorship. Not a single social problem can be solved without expropriating the huge fortunes of the financial elite and reorganising society on a socialist basis.

The SGP is contesting the federal election to win the working class to a socialist programme and to unite internationally. Support our election campaign, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the SGP.



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