

Germany: Support the struggle of train drivers and conductors! Build independent action committees!

Socialist Equality Party
2 September 2021

The strike by train drivers and conductors employed by German Railways (Deutsche Bahn, DB) deserves the solidarity of the entire working class.

The strike is about whether train crews should pay the price for the COVID-19 crisis, while management is lining its pockets and stock markets are soaring. Deutsche Bahn is determined to impose a null wage increase for the current year, even though inflation is approaching 5 percent. This would mean a massive cut in real wages.

In fact, a more fundamental issue is at stake. Big business is using the Corona pandemic for a frontal attack on all the conditions and rights of the working class—not only in Germany, but internationally. Two decades after a Social-Democratic government led by Gerhard Schröder imposed its “Agenda 2010”—which included the anti-social Hartz IV laws, low wages, pension cuts and massive tax cuts for the rich—the current government and big business are stepping up their offensive. They see this policy as essential to fuel the stock market boom, further increase their already huge fortunes and finance new wars.

Human lives are treated as a mere cost factor in the COVID-19 pandemic. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who says out loud what others of his kind think—made a cost-benefit analysis, concluding that 50,000 COVID-19 deaths a year constitute an “acceptable level,” and that saving a patient should cost no more than £30,000. Even slaves were once traded at a higher price!

According to official statistics, 93,000 people have died in Germany and 4.5 million worldwide because ruling elites across the globe refused to implement strict lockdowns and other measures that could have quelled the pandemic in a matter of weeks. After the German government, the European Union and the European Central Bank spent trillions in aid for big business and the banks, they rapidly reopened factories, offices and schools to ensure the flow of profits.

For the rich, the pandemic is a lucrative business. In Germany, the number of billionaires rose from 107 to 136 in the pandemic year of 2020, their fortunes from \$447 billion to \$625 billion. Keeping this orgy of self-enrichment going

requires constantly intensifying the exploitation of the working class.

Whether in the railways, public transport, hospitals, parcel and delivery services or the car and parties industries, millions of workers are angry as shift work and overtime make life more and more unbearable. Pay levels are falling while the prospect of unemployment and a life in poverty in old age increases. Workers are looking for a way to fight back.

That is why the vast majority of the working class welcomes the rail strike despite the inconvenience it causes, and that is also why Deutsche Bahn is behaving so provocatively, even though its offer and the demand of the train drivers' union (GDL) are not too far apart. Deutsche Bahn boss Richard Lutz is playing hardball with the full backing of the German government, which owns Deutsche Bahn. They are intent on making an example of the train drivers and conductors and prevent other sections of workers following in their footsteps.

Discontent is surging in many workplaces and companies. Amid the second round of the rail strike, Siemens workers in Berlin protested against job cuts and nurses went on strike against intolerable working conditions in hospitals. In the US, workers at Volvo Trucks and Dana, an auto parts supplier, overwhelmingly rejected unacceptable contracts agreed to by the unions after having previously formed independent action committees. Similar struggles are taking place in many other countries.

The train drivers are fighting not only DB management and the government, but also the unions. The head of the German Trade union Federation (DGB) Reiner Hoffmann and the head of the Rail and Transport Union (EVG), Klaus-Dieter Hommel, have stabbed the train drivers' strike in the back. The unions have long since stopped representing workers' interests. They are nothing more than co-managers and company cops who reject and suppress the class struggle. This is true not only for the EVG, DB's company union, but also every other union.

The train drivers' union GDL is no exception. The head of the GDL, Claus Weselsky, is under enormous pressure: train drivers are fed up with the financial restructuring of the railways being carried out at their expense. At the same time

the GDL's existence is threatened by the reactionary law on Collective Bargaining Unity, which only allows one union to represent workers at the workplace. Nevertheless, it would be a dangerous illusion to put one's trust in Weselsky.

The GDL is just as committed to the German system of "social partnership," i.e., defending the interests of the company, as all other trade unions. Weselsky himself is even a member of the party of the German chancellor, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Weselsky has ended all previous contract bargaining rounds with rotten compromises resulting in real wage cuts and bans on rail workers taking further industrial action. The GDL's current demand also falls far short of covering inflation.

Above all, the GDL rejects the broad mobilisation that is absolutely necessary to make the strike a success. The limited duration of the individual strikes called by the GDL makes it easy for Deutsche Bahn to adjust and react in time. The fact that the current strike will last five days—from September 2–6—instead of two days like the first two strikes, does not change this.

The entire history of the labour movement shows that only an indefinite strike can bring the opposing side to its knees. Weselsky, however, categorically rejects such an option. "I never talk about indefinite industrial action in the railway system," he told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper.

Instead of appealing to the broad mass of workers, Weselsky relies on the right-wing German Civil Service Federation, to which the GDL belongs. He even invited the reactionary head of the German Police Union, Rainer Wendt, as guest speaker at a GDL strike rally. Inside the railways, the GDL is driving a wedge between drivers and administrative employees, whose jobs, according to Weselsky, should be cut.

To lead the struggle against the offensive of DB management and the ruling class, new organisations of struggle must be built that are independent of the unions and their officials in workplaces—action committees controlled by workers and accountable only to them.

These committees must provide workers with information, democratically decide on demands, develop a strategy for struggle and oversee negotiations on working conditions and collective agreements. They must network nationwide and build contacts with workers in other countries and sectors.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched a call in April to build the International Workers Alliance of Action Committees, 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 statement says in this regard: "The ICFI and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are advancing this initiative to begin and develop a global counteroffensive of the working class against the homicidal policies of the governments controlled by

the capitalist ruling class, which are responsible for the worldwide catastrophe."

There are now numerous independent action committees that—like at Volvo Trucks and Dana in the United States—have successfully mobilised workers against the sell-out by the unions.

The construction of a network of workers' committees is no substitute for building a new party to represent workers' interests. Serious practical steps require a programme and principles. Germany in particular has a long tradition in this regard. Workers in Germany built the Social Democratic Party in the 19th century before they built trade unions, and at a time when the SPD fought for a socialist programme under the banner of Marxism.

Today, train drivers and conductors are confronted with political tasks at every turn. All of the political parties represented in the Bundestag, including today's SPD and the Left Party, vehemently oppose their strike. The leading election candidate for the Left Party, Dietmar Bartsch, even called upon Chancellor Angela Merkel to intervene and end the strike. "A third strike would be completely unreasonable," he told the DPA news agency. "The Chancellor must prevent the strike and order the rail company to meet the demands. For pandemic reasons alone, this theatre must end."

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is contesting the federal election to build a new mass party in the working class to fight for a socialist and international programme. "No social problem can be solved without expropriating the banks and corporations and placing them under the democratic control of the working class," our election programme states.

We invite striking railway workers and all those who are not ready to accept growing social inequality, the murderous official pandemic policy and the return to militarism to contact the SGP and discuss the building of independent action committees. Support the SGP's election campaign and become a member!



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