

Germany: Train drivers launch third consecutive strike for better wages and working conditions

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3 September 2021

At 2 in the morning on Thursday, train drivers and other railway workers began a third consecutive strike to obtain better wages and working conditions. In freight transport, a strike had already begun on Wednesday afternoon. It is becoming increasingly clear that the industrial action raises political issues which cannot be resolved or left in the hands of the trade union that called for the strikes, the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL).

The offer made to strikers on Tuesday by the management of the Deutsche Bahn (DB) railway company is a sham. Deutsche Bahn remains insistent on cutting the company pensions of railway workers and freezing wages for 2021.

GDL leader Claus Weselsky accused the DB board of seeking to destroy his union. He said that although the GDL had recently gained about 4,000 new members, the DB management was not prepared to comply with a contract already agreed with the GDL.

Earlier this year, a new law on Collective Bargaining Unity (Tarifeinheitgesetz, TEG) has been applied to the railways which stipulates that companies can only conclude contracts with the union which has the largest number of members in that workplace. In most railway companies, the larger union is the Rail and Transport Workers' Union (EVG), which has already agreed to a pay freeze and has ordered its members to work during the strike, effectively forcing them to scab on workers in the GDL.

On Thursday, the DB board also took legal action against the train drivers' strike. Martin Seiler, the board member responsible for human resources, applied to the labour court in Frankfurt am Main for a temporary injunction to ban the industrial action. According to Seiler, the strike did "not fall into the framework of applicable law."

The Labour Court threw out the application the same evening, stating it was not possible to determine sufficiently in summary proceedings whether inadmissible strike objectives were being pursued. Deutsche Bahn has announced that it will appeal against the court's decision, and the Regional Labour Court in Frankfurt scheduled the appeal for Friday.

Drivers and conductors, who have worked day and night during the coronavirus pandemic, are very bitter about the action taken by the DB executive. "We have practically no weekends off, have different working hours every day, have been on the job throughout the pandemic. Who is of systemic importance here?" said one striking train driver at Frankfurt's main station. "The DB executive awards itself bonuses worth millions, but nobody cares about us."

In fact, the offer made by DB to the workers is a new provocation. Deutsche Bahn did agree to pay a one-time coronavirus bonus of "600 or 400 euros" and "shorten" the duration of the contract from the originally planned 40 months to 36 months. In these three years, however, wages would increase by a total of just 3.2 percent, under conditions of soaring inflation which is already nearly 4 percent in Germany. The DB board still refuses to pay even one cent more in 2021.

At the same time, the board of directors is raking in millions. The annual financial statement of Deutsche Bahn for 2019 listed total remuneration of the six board members at more than 7.4 million euros; in addition, more than 1.3 billion euros is listed in provisions for the pensions of retired board members.

The head of Deutsche Bahn, Richard Lutz, pocketed more than 1.7 million euros in 2019. Ronald Pofalla, DB's Board Member for Infrastructure and former chief of staff of the German Chancellery, raked in just under 1.25 million. Martin Seiler, the head of Human Resources

who is leading contract bargaining, took home more than 800,000 euros.

“The inequality is unimaginably blatant,” a striking train attendant in Frankfurt commented. “I have huge difficulty finding any affordable housing here in Frankfurt. You can’t find anything in the city for less than 800 euros, and yet I am often expected to turn up here at the station in the middle of the night to work.”

Like other strikers, including very young ones, this train conductor was particularly outraged by the board’s attacks on the company pension. “We want at least the hope that we can live reasonably securely when we retire. Poverty in old age is definitely an issue. For example, my grandma is now in a situation where she has to live on a monthly pension of just 650 euros.”

Train drivers and conductors are fighting over social issues that affect all workers. They are in conflict not only with the DB board and the German government, which owns Deutsche Bahn, they also face the hostility of the rest of the trade unions and all of Germany’s main political parties.

The head of the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB) Reiner Hoffmann and EVG chairman Klaus-Dieter Hommel have publicly denounced the strikes and stabbed train workers in the back. The leading election candidate of the Left Party, Dietmar Bartsch, has described the strike as “theatre” and “completely unreasonable” and called upon Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) to intervene.

For its part, the GDL is also neither willing nor able to lead a principled struggle for a real improvement of wages and working conditions. It has only called for limited strike action: two strikes of two days, and now a five-day stoppage, but vehemently rejects an indefinite strike.

At the same time, the demands set by the GDL also mean a real wage reduction, even if they were fully implemented. The GDL is demanding 1.4 percent more pay this year and 1.8 percent next year to cover a 28-month period, plus a coronavirus bonus of 600 euros. In 2014, the GDL called off a strike on short notice, although it had been confirmed as legal by a labour court.

The career of Martin Seiler, the personnel director of Deutsche Bahn, illustrates the close relations between the trade union bureaucracy and management. For 15 years Seiler was a works council member and trade union section leader, first of the German Postal Workers’ Union, then of the service trade union Verdi. In 2003, he moved to the management of Deutsche Post AG, and twelve years later became Labour Director at Deutsche

Telekom, responsible for 70,000 employees. At the beginning of 2018, he took over as personnel director at Deutsche Bahn in charge of 320,000 railway employees.

The German media is acting as a mouthpiece for management in the rail strike. This is another issue that deeply angers strikers. The media describe the strike as a pure “power play” by the GDL. All of the news reports about the strike on Wednesday contained the sentence: “Despite a new offer from Deutsche Bahn, train drivers began their announced strike this morning.” None of the media outlets said a word about what the “offer” really entailed.

A team from the German public broadcaster ZDF filmed and interviewed several train drivers in front of Frankfurt’s main station on Wednesday morning, but the subsequent broadcast featured just one sentence from the strikers alongside a number of spiteful comments critical of the strike.

“We’ve explained everything in detail to the media so many times,” one striking train driver told the *World Socialist Web Site* in response. “But they don’t publish it.” Instead, for example, the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper reported on the GDL’s “hunger for power,” while the *Hamburger Abendblatt* described the strike as “out of control.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) advocates mobilising broad sections of the working class to support the strike and warns it cannot not be left in the hands of GDL leadership. It is necessary to build independent action committees. Members and supporters discussed with strikers at stations and distributed the SGP statement, entitled: “Support the struggle of train drivers and conductors! Build independent action committees!”

In the statement the SGP formulates the political tasks facing rail workers: “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 Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is contesting the federal election to build a new mass party in the working class, fighting for a socialist and international programme.



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