

German union boss attacks striking railway workers

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The aggressive attacks by German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) head Reiner Hoffmann on striking train drivers and conductors at Deutsche Bahn were the top story on most news programs on Saturday. The print media eagerly picked up Hoffmann's attack on the strike.

In an interview with the *Rheinische Post*, Hoffmann accused the striking train drivers of asserting "their particular interests against the general interests of all other railway employees" and playing the "groups of employees in a company" against each other.

Ultimately, Hoffmann called on the head of the train drivers' union (GDL), Claus Weselsky, to resume negotiations. "Although the differences between the union and Deutsche Bahn are not very great, Mr. Weselsky refuses to return to the negotiating table. That, I think, is wrong."

In essence, Weselsky is concerned with "maintaining his union and increasing its sphere of influence," Hoffmann claimed. When it comes to wages and working conditions, GDL and Deutsche Bahn are "not that far apart," he said. According to the DGB boss, Deutsche Bahn's latest offer "hardly differs from the demands of the GDL."

Hoffmann's attacks on the strike underscore the fact that the trade unions are no longer workers' organizations but have turned into auxiliary forces for the companies and the state. His claim that the GDL strike has "split" the railway workforce turns reality on its head.

The train staff are fighting against having to pay the price for the coronavirus crisis, while management is stuffing its pockets and the stock exchanges are booming. Strikers reject a wage freeze for the current year, as agreed by the DGB-affiliated union EVG with Deutsche Bahn. The strikers also demand a one-time coronavirus bonus for their self-sacrificing and dangerous work during the pandemic, and the defence of the company pension that Deutsche Bahn wants to cancel.

With their strike against these austerity dictates, train drivers and conductors are not only defending the interests of the entire railway workforce, but also of the working class as a whole. Big business and the political establishment are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic everywhere for a frontal attack on workers' social achievements. That is why Deutsche Bahn and the federal government behind it categorically reject the

demands of the GDL, which do not even keep up with the rate of inflation.

With his attack on the strikers, Hoffmann is making himself the mouthpiece of this onslaught. His accusation that the strike divided the railway workforce is reminiscent of the "Newspeak" in Orwell's novel *1984*.

"Solidarity" used to mean the support of workers who—on behalf of everyone else—fought for social rights or defended existing ones. This is how important achievements—such as the eight-hour day, the five-day week or sick pay—were won. Anyone who opposed or attacked these fights was a splitter and a strikebreaker. With Hoffmann it is the other way round: Those who support the wage dictates of the railway and its house union EVG are "in solidarity," while those who fight against it are splitters.

The DGB boss embodies the detached layer of affluent trade union bureaucrats who prosper from their services for the ruling class and who respond to every movement from below with bitter hostility. If he is already reacting so aggressively to the strike of the GDL—a conservative professional union that belongs to the German Association of State Officials and whose demands are far from radical—one can imagine how he will rage when a truly independent offensive by workers develops.

Born in Wuppertal in 1955, Hoffmann spent his entire professional life surrounded by the union bureaucracy, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the European Union. Apart from a brief interlude as a commercial clerk at Hoechst AG, he never worked in any other profession.

Hoffmann has a university degree as a qualified economist. From 1984 to 1994 he worked at the Hans Böckler Foundation and from 1994 to 2003 at the European Trade Union Confederation, where he was most recently deputy general secretary. In 2009, he became head of the North-Rhine Westphalia district of the mining and chemical union IG BCE. In 2013, he moved to the federal executive committee of the DGB and succeeded Michael Sommer as chairman in 2014.

In his first year in office, Hoffmann lashed out against limited so-called "warning strikes" by railway workers and pilots, which at that time developed outside the control of the DGB. In a letter to the German Association of State Officials Chairman Klaus Dauderstädt, Hoffmann asked him to "put the GDL on a

leash.” In the same year, Hoffmann published a comment on the Foreign Ministry’s “Review 2014” website supporting the campaign for a more aggressive German military policy.

When in 2018, under increasing public pressure, even sections of the SPD timidly questioned the Hartz laws, Hoffmann vehemently defended the anti-worker “labour market reform.” He said he could not understand the “gasping” that was the reaction of many to the term “Hartz IV,” the poverty-level social welfare payments introduced by an SPD-led federal government in 2005. It is “not a good idea” if the unemployed are no longer forced to take up work, Hoffmann said, because work is “participation and important for social cohesion.” Hartz IV, that is, the massive introduction of low-wage work, Hoffmann claimed, has made a significant contribution to lowering unemployment and increasing the number of employees.

With a speech at the SPD party congress in May 2018, Hoffmann made a significant contribution to the decision of the divided party to return to the “Grand Coalition” government of the SPD and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), which continued its right-wing policies and helped the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) become the largest opposition party. The *Tagesspiegel* quoted Hoffmann at the time as being proud of having contributed to the formation of the government.

Hoffmann’s most recent attack on the rail strike in the middle of the federal election campaign also serves to convey to the next federal government—regardless of how it is composed—that it has the support of the DGB. In the same interview in which he attacked the strike, Hoffmann said, “Unlike in the past, we unions see this time in the election manifestos that there are similarities and overlaps with all democratic parties, even with the FDP (Free Democratic Party). It is amazing.”

The leader of the free market FDP, Christian Lindner, reacted promptly. He said the escalation of the strike was “to the detriment of an entire country” and the next parliament would have to “reform” the legal regulations for industrial action, i.e., create the basis for banning strikes.

The workers’ problem is not just Hoffmann and other right-wing union bureaucrats, but the perspective and program on which the unions are based. Even when the unions still functioned as defensive organizations of the working class, they were limited to determining the price of labor—i.e., wages, working conditions, etc.—and therefore their very existence depended on the maintenance of the capitalist system. Their aim was not to abolish capitalist exploitation, but to make it more effective.

Insofar as industries grew primarily within the national framework, German workers were able to make limited gains through the unions, albeit through determined struggles. This period ended with the emergence of transnational corporations and the globalization of capitalist production. For decades, the German trade unions, like their counterparts around the world,

have tried to strengthen the international economic position of their “own” capitalists by lowering wages and increasing work speedup. The unions long ago abandoned any association with the class struggle, which must be conducted on a globally coordinated basis. Instead they have allied themselves with the struggle by the German-based capitalists and government for the domination of markets, raw materials and world power.

As early as World War I the trade unions promoted militarism and made a significant contribution to the SPD, betraying its anti-war program and supporting the slaughter. After Hitler came to power, the ADGB union federation offered him its cooperation and marched under the swastika flag on May 1—which didn’t stop Hitler from crushing the unions.

The DGB and its individual trade unions, the number of which has shrunk to eight after several mergers, have been losing members for years. In 1991, after the merger with the GDR trade unions, there were just under 12 million members, today they have less than half that. Over two-thirds are members of IG Metall and the Verdi service union. The vast majority are passive contributors and retirees.

In essence, the unions are bloated bureaucratic machines. The DGB, which as an umbrella organization has no individual members, receives 170 million euros a year from the individual unions. A large part of this money is used to finance 800 full-time employees in the nine districts and the Berlin headquarters. Hoffmann himself earns almost 15,000 euros a month, not including supervisory board remuneration and other additional earnings. Among other things, he sits on the supervisory board of the chemical giant Bayer AG.

To defend their rights and achievements, the workers need their own independent fighting organizations—rank-and-file committees, which operate independently of the corporatist unions—an international, socialist perspective and their own political party: the Socialist Equality Party.



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