German train drivers ready to take indefinite strike action

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7 September 2021

The third and latest rail strike in the contract struggle by the Train Drivers' Union (GDL) ended early on Tuesday morning. Carried out over a period of 5 days, the strike was the longest strike so far and for the first time lasted over a weekend.

In addition to train drivers and conductors, hand-workers, train dispatchers, service staff, maintenance workers and on-board caterers joined the strike—a total of more than 10,000 workers, as GDL leader Claus Weselsky explained in Berlin. Even the train drivers' employer, Deutsche Bahn (DB), conceded that significantly more train drivers had taken part in this latest strike.

At Tuesday's strike rallies in Berlin and Frankfurt, teams from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to strikers. Many called for the industrial action to continue indefinitely in order to overcome the provocative and obstructionist stance of the DB executive.

Can, a young train conductor, said, "It has been 5 days this time, but the next step must be an indefinite strike. Now we have to strike harder, not starting at 2 a.m., but during the day instead. Everything has to come to a standstill at the same time," he continued, "then they up there will be forced to rethink. Let's see then. It must really hurt."

He explained that the offer made so far by Deutsche Bahn was "a joke." Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, he said, train conductors had had to work continuously. "If we could at least get a thank you for the fact that we sometimes worked 10 to 12 hours—in hot summer, on full trains with around 800 passengers. That was often really stressful. Sometimes there were delays of 30 to 40 minutes, because some pandemic opponents didn't want to wear masks. And now we are not supposed to get anything for what we did."

Railway workers are refusing to pay the price for the COVID-19 crisis while the DB management rakes in huge incomes and the stock markets are booming. Can said that he was disgusted by the obstructionist attitude of the railway management and the German government. "We railway workers enjoy our work, but this strike has to happen now. The DB board is stuffing its pockets and we are told there is no money. We railway workers are tough. If we take up the fight and unite with other colleagues, we are all stronger together than the employers."

Strikers everywhere reacted enthusiastically when they heard of the solidarity messages from their French colleagues. In Paris, several railway workers from the state-owned railway company SNCF expressed their solidarity with the rail strike in Germany. In Berlin rail workers spontaneously declared that they "really had to unite with their colleagues in France—and in other countries as well."

In Frankfurt am Main, a group of four strikers—Jürgen, Hans and two colleagues, all DB locomotive drivers—were very pleased to hear about the solidarity wishes of their French colleagues: "That's good news, we didn't know that", Jürgen said. "That's powerful! Thank you to the French colleagues."

The workers in Frankfurt also declared they would immediately support an indefinite strike to "prevent the zero pay round this year and defend company pensions. It's quite clear, we are fighting for an increase in pay and a shorter contract term. But it's not just about the money," Jürgen and Hans explained. "It's also about job conditions."

"We often end up with 200 or even more hours a month. There are colleagues who have already accumulated a thousand hours of overtime." Jürgen explains, "In February, my overtime account was down

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to zero hours, and since then I have already accumulated more than forty hours of overtime. For many workers that is simply not feasible. They say, I won't do it for that money. It's not everyone's cup of tea."

In fact, the wage demand made by the GDL—a 3.2 percent wage increase covering a period of 28 months—is far below the rate of inflation and is tantamount to a real wage cut. On this point Jürgen said, "The money will not be enough either way—neither this year nor next year. Everything is getting more expensive but the railways have money: Otherwise they wouldn't finance so many managers. And we, who are doing all the work, are being left empty-handed."

When asked about the pandemic, Jürgen said, "This shows there is no global cooperation. It would be feasible to eradicate the virus, but they did it all wrong from the start." He then spoke about his sister, who works as a nurse. He said, "The way they've been treating nursing staff for over a year is scandalous; they have just been left on their own."

Two other strikers reported on their working conditions. One said, "About ten percent of our shifts are so-called on-call days. This means that we don't know when they will start and what they entail until shortly before they start. That means I don't know beforehand whether I have to start work at six in the morning, at noon or in the afternoon." In the past, he said, there were even more on-call days, but that number had been slightly reduced in the wake of previous strikes by train drivers.

A worker explained, "With the recently passed Tariff Unity Law (Tarifeinheitsgesetz) the DB management is trying to ensure that only the contract applies that is agreed by the union with the most members," he said. "Since I'm in a division where the company union, the EVG, has a majority of members, it's quite likely that worse conditions will be reimposed with a new contract."

The rail workers were particularly angry at the vicious tirade by the head of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), Reiner Hoffmann, who has denounced the rail strike. The strikers pointed out that the EVG, which is affiliated to the DGB, is currently operating as an open strikebreaker.

The WSWS reporters explained the need for independent action committees to extend the struggle and lead it to victory, and drew attention to the WSWS response to the DGB leader's tirade. The WSWS had noted, "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."

The perspective of creating action committees, independent of the trade unions and coordinating workers' struggles across sectional and national borders, met with considerable interest on the part of the strikers.

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