

Despite great willingness of workers to strike, German train drivers' union ends industrial action

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Their willingness to fight was great and steadily increased in recent weeks; railway workers have been on strike three times since August. The train drivers' union (GDL) was forced to extend the last round of strikes to five days and include striking on weekends for the first time.

In addition to train drivers and conductors, engineers, dispatchers, service staff, maintenance workers and on-board caterers also went on strike, paralyzing much of freight and passenger traffic for days. Many railway workers knew that behind the uncompromising and aggressive stance of the Deutsche Bahn (DB) management was the federal government, which wanted to set an example by demanding a pay freeze this year and attacking company pensions.

In response, the demand for an indefinite strike and an extension of the industrial action grew louder and gained wider support. When employees of the Berlin hospital groups Charité and Vivantes also went on an indefinite strike against intolerable working conditions and starvation wages—and many companies announced mass layoffs and wage cuts—the demand for joint and coordinated industrial action gained support.

In this situation, GDL head Claus Weselsky desperately sought a compromise to strangle the strike. While he was still using pithy words at strike meetings to rage against the refusal of the DB board, shouting to the cheers of the strikers, “We’re only at the beginning. We can do even more. After the strike is before the strike!” But at the same time, he was holding talks with leading politicians who, in view of the upcoming federal elections, were urging an end to the dispute.

Weselsky, who is himself a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), does not want the federal election and the subsequent formation of a government to take place in a situation where the train drivers' strike becomes the starting point for a broad strike movement and radicalization of the working class, any more than the establishment parties do.

On Thursday, he appeared in front of the cameras together with Martin Seiler, head of Deutsche Bahn's personnel department, and announced a compromise that “does not meet all the GDL's demands, but it is acceptable.”

Weselsky and Seiler were framed by the state premiers of Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein, Stephan Weil (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and Daniel Günther (CDU), who had acted as mediators in the negotiations, which were held in strict secrecy behind the backs of rail workers and the public.

Weselsky eloquently thanked the two regional heads for their outstanding mediating role. Weil replied, “We have had an interest far beyond Deutsche Bahn in resolving this collective dispute, which has been going on for a very long time after all.”

Looking at the outcome of the negotiations, it is clear that the concessions made by DB are a mockery and only serve to enable the GDL to break off the strike.

In order to formally satisfy the GDL's demand that there should not be pay freeze this year, the wage increase will be brought forward by one month to December 1, 2021. It amounts to 1.5 percent, far less than the current inflation rate of almost 4 percent, and is valid for 16 months.

The next wage increase, a further 1.8 percent, will not come until March 2023. The collective agreement runs for 32 months—until the end of October 2023. Under the terms of the deal, strikes are therefore prohibited for the next two years.

This means that a significant reduction in real wages has been agreed for the next few years, which will not be offset by the so-called coronavirus premium. In December 2021, this premium will amount to €600 for lower wage groups and €400 for higher wage groups, with another uniform €400 in March 2022.

In its press release, the GDL emphasizes above all that it has succeeded in beating back the attack on company pensions. “Our pensions are safe!” cheers Weselsky in the

GDL podcast. But that is also not true.

The GDL has agreed to the planned restructuring of the company pension scheme introducing a two-tier system. The current supplementary pension system will only apply to so-called existing employees starting next year. New hires will be subject to different conditions, the details of which have not yet been determined.

Above all, the GDL wanted to ensure that it would not be excluded from the negotiating table by the Collective Bargaining Unity Act (TEG), which cedes the right to negotiate in any industry to the majority union. Weselsky said yesterday, “With the appropriate membership strength, we will also conclude better collective agreements for our colleagues in signal boxes, in stations and in the maintenance of network operations.”

The Railway and Transport Union (EVG), which acts as the in-house union at Deutsche Bahn, had already agreed to a wage settlement at the end of last year that was even worse than the GDL’s. It announced renegotiations yesterday.

The industrial dispute at Deutsche Bahn and the massive strike of the past few weeks show two things above all:

Firstly, they make clear the strength and power of rail and transit workers. After barely a week of strike action, fears grew in the executive suites of many companies that supply chains would collapse, raw materials, input materials, spare parts, etc., would not be available and finished products could not be delivered. A halt to production and thus the radicalization of many workers in other areas would be the result.

Secondly, it became clear that no consistent struggle for the rights and interests of workers can be conducted with the existing trade unions. Even though the GDL is somewhat more radical than the EVG, it subordinates the workers’ interests to the welfare of the company. At the crucial moment when the strike turned into a conflict with the government and received great support from other workers, GDL agreed to a rotten compromise and broke off the strike.

The true face of the unions was shown by the head of the German Confederation of Union (DGB) Reiner Hoffmann when he fiercely attacked the striking train drivers and conductors two weeks ago, accusing them of acting without solidarity because they rejected the wage-cutting agreement accepted by the EVG, which belongs to the DGB. In a newspaper interview, Hoffmann had claimed that with the strike, one occupational group was asserting “its particular interests against the overall interests of all other railroad employees” and playing off the “groups of employees in one company” against each other.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) has intervened intensively in the strike. In many articles and leaflets, it has clearly shown that the problem is

not simply right-wing and corrupt bureaucrats at the head of the DGB unions, but the perspective on which the unions are based.

Two weeks ago, we wrote: “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 labour—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.”

The conclusion from this is clear: The contract agreed by the GDL does not solve any of the problems confronting train drivers, conductors and other railway employees. The negotiation results must be rejected by the rail employees.

In order to defend their rights and achievements, workers need their own independent fighting organizations: rank-and-file committees, an international, socialist perspective and their own political party—the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei.



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