

Rail workers in Germany: “We face the same problems here as our colleagues in the US”

Our reporters

25 September 2022

The Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee is hosting a public meeting Wednesday, September 28, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, “Organize independently to defeat government and union-backed sellout!” All railroaders and their supporters are urged to attend and register for the meeting here. To join or contact the committee, send an email to railwrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the bottom of this page.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with rail workers in Germany about the industrial struggle in the United States in which 100,000 railroaders are confronting the White House, billion-dollar rail companies and their trade unions. Here, too, train drivers, engineers and other rail employees who know the WSWS are following the struggle of their American brothers and sisters with enthusiasm and support.

The struggle of American railroad workers for better wages and conditions is increasingly turning into a power struggle with the White House. President Biden and the railroad companies have reached an agreement with the unions to call off a strike that had been decided for September 16. At the same time, there is the “recommendation” of the Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) that does not meet a single demand of the railroad workers.

American railroad workers have been without a contract for three years and have not received a wage increase during that time. Most recently, an independent Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee has emerged at the initiative of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. On September 14, some 500 rail workers attended an online meeting of the committee, while the White House, rail barons and union bureaucrats conferred behind closed doors. The meeting virtually unanimously adopted a resolution stating that rail workers will not tolerate the violation of their right to strike and will not accept any contract that is not explicitly ratified by the workforce.

While the German media has completely ignored this important development in the class struggle in the US, the WSWS regularly reports on it. In Germany, WSWS reporters spoke with several rail workers who support the struggle of the American rail workers, with which they stand in solidarity.

“It’s good that the train drivers and rail workers are taking to the barricades and organizing independently of their union,”

says **Andreas**, who worked for many years as a train driver in the Ruhr region. “Because the unions do what the employer says. It’s no different here in Germany.”

Indeed, a year ago at Deutsche Bahn (DB), train drivers and conductors went on strike for several weeks before their dispute was isolated and sold out by union leaders.

As for the deal the US rail companies and the Biden administration negotiated with the unions, Andreas says that was to be feared. “In fact, they should have taken full strike action by now, they should have gone on the offensive.”

Andreas changed jobs for health reasons after many years. “I wore out my neck and spine, which is a typical railroad disease,” he says. Now he works as a crane operator for a subcontractor at steelmaker ArcelorMittal in Duisburg, where there are also long weekly working hours. “ArcelorMittal keeps producing until the doctor calls because they are currently getting good prices. It all takes a toll on our bones, and we’re paying the price.” Nevertheless, the former train driver thinks his crane driver job is better today.

Reports of an American railroader working up to 80 hours a week have shaken Andreas: “That’s not normal. You’re running on empty there.” He knows about the difficult working conditions of railroad workers. Of his time as a train driver, he reports, “We were always given more to do.”

New duties were added all the time, he says, even though he and his colleagues had been operating the train alone for many decades. “Brake officer, car inspector, local shunter, etc.—you do it all by yourself now,” Andreas says. “Catastrophes like the one a few weeks ago in the freight yard in Herne are a consequence of these working conditions. Because there, under these conditions, safety is also no longer guaranteed.”

However, an 80-hour workweek was even worse, he said. It was “homicidal for you as a train driver and for everyone else.” Concentration inevitably wanes and there was hardly time to recover. “It takes a while for the body to get back into rest mode after a long shift. With an 80-hour week, you don’t even get into that relaxation and rest mode.”

He did not know exactly how much they earned but was sure “train drivers certainly aren’t well paid in the US.” When he sees on TV how long the trains are there, “it gives me the creeps. Here in Germany, we’re only allowed to pull 750-meter

trains with one locomotive and 900-meter trains with two locomotives.”

Andreas finds it particularly “brutal” that the unions have called in the government agency PEB: “Why is the government interfering? These are all private companies.” He says that proves his experience with the unions. “The unions, no matter which one you take, try to drive down wages. An acquaintance of mine—he’s retired now—received an hourly wage of €27 as a train driver until the end.”

Today, the railroads like to use career changers from other backgrounds who are only trained for a short time. “They then come in via temporary work and then have an hourly wage of €13,” Andreas reports. “You can complain to the union or the works council all you want. They won’t budge, they support it.”

In Bavaria, we spoke with **Peter**, who is a third-year apprentice at DB Fernverkehr in Munich. Peter said he thought the situation of railroad workers in the US was bad. “The shift changes, for example, are not sustainable. Here in Germany, you have a break of at least 12 hours after a 12-hour shift, but that is actually too little. After a 12-hour shift, you are totally exhausted. The obligation to be constantly on call is also not okay. More workers are needed so that everyone can work normal shifts and also have days off.”

Peter was particularly angered by the behaviour of the unions in the US but is familiar with such things already. He says, “Here in Germany, too, the unions work closely with the companies. There are many people on the board of EVG [Rail and Transport Workers Union] who were previously in high-ranking positions at DB. That’s a close relationship with the management, but not with the workers. These people need to be fired and replaced with capable people who really represent the interests of the workers.” As for the Biden administration’s intervention, Peter says, “The government has no business getting involved. It’s just supporting the company.”

Peter added, “There’s nothing left but prepare and carry out a nationwide strike, especially when these maggots get involved.” For him, the initiative of railroad workers to organize independently in rank-and-file action committees was “a very good idea. Such a strike must be well planned. You don’t have any other option anymore. We should do it here in Germany, too. We are basically facing the same problems as our colleagues in the US. Therefore, the action committees must also serve to unite us internationally. I wish my colleagues in the US every success!”

Herrmann Helke worked for the railways in the Ruhr region for several decades. He reports: “Almost 50 years ago, I started working for the state railways in West Germany, which was ‘reunited’ with the [East German] Reichsbahn to form Deutsche Bahn AG after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This meant total reorganization, frustration and massive job cuts, but the union leadership expressed its loyalty to the reorganization right from the start. In the end, colleagues had to wipe their

eyes as their jobs were melting away so quickly.

“Colleagues at American railroads are about to take a big step. They are on their way to breaking the power of the conspiratorial alliance made up of the insatiable capitalists, the corrupt union leadership and a lying clique of politicians and journalists. I follow developments on the WSWS very closely—after all, the media don’t report on them.

“I am enormously pleased to see my colleagues in the US going on the offensive and building an alternative leadership to assert the power of workers, especially railway workers at the moment. This is worth every ounce of support!”

Tom, a tram driver in Munich, also wanted to express his support for railway workers in the US. “Through your struggle,” he writes, “it becomes clear how politicians and unions are conspiring with railroad corporations and shareholders. Rotten compromises are being made to stall your strike.”

He continues, “We workers in Germany and all over the world are following your struggle very closely because we all face the same problems: The unions are on the side of the companies. In addition, there is inflation and rapidly rising prices for food, heating gas, electricity and fuel. Politicians are spending billions on war and the military, which the unions also support. At the same time, there’s no money for health care, and measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic have been all but eliminated.”

This was precisely why, Tom stresses, “It is so important that we workers unite in action committees independent of the unions and network internationally. Our struggle against the capitalist system can only succeed if we base it on a socialist program.”

The WSWS is the only news source reporting regularly on the important battles that herald a new upsurge of class struggle in the United States. We call on train drivers and other rail workers to contact us at railwrfc@gmail.com and participate in building independent action committees.



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