

180,000 German transport workers strike, paralyzing large parts of air, rail and local transport

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The Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft (EVG, Railway and Transport Union) called out 180,000 workers at Deutsche Bahn (DB) on strike midnight Sunday for 24 hours. Deutsche Bahn announced that it was forced to “completely suspend” long-distance traffic. There were also no trains in regional and suburban rail services.

Together with a simultaneous strike by Verdi in the public sector, this so-called “mega-strike”—it was the biggest warning strike in Germany more than 30 years—paralyzed large parts of air, rail and local transport and freight shipping throughout the country. The strike involved many tens of thousands of railroad workers, bus, street and subway drivers, technicians, maintenance and highway workers, airport ground services, security and counter personnel, and workers at ports and highway maintenance facilities.

Deutsche Bahn was forced to shut down rail services nationwide, and local and long-distance public transport services went on joint strike in seven German states. Munich, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Berlin, Hanover, Hamburg and Bremen airports were on strike, and around 380,000 passengers were affected.

The strikes in Germany are part of a growing movement of the European and international working class against social inequality, austerity and war. In France millions of workers will take to the streets again on Tuesday to protest French President Emmanuel Macron’s pension cuts. Mass strikes and protests have also been erupting in Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Britain and several other European countries. In all these struggles workers are not only confronted with the companies and the state but also with the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracies.

With its warning strike, the EVG was reacting to an initial offer made by Deutsche Bahn on March 14. Represented by DB executive board member Martin Seiler, the company refused to meet the demands of the EVG in the first round of negotiations at the end of February.

The union is demanding wage increases of 12 percent, or at least €650 a month, for the 180,000 employees it represents, over a twelve-month contract period. It is also demanding some minor structural changes in collective agreements. The rail company described these demands as clearly too high, claiming that they corresponded to a 25 percent increase.

The offer now being presented by the state-owned company can only be described as a farce. The wages of rail workers would be raised by a total of five percent in two steps: by three percent from December 1, 2023, and by two percent from August 1, 2024. In addition, there would be a so-called inflation compensation premium

subsidized by the federal government. This one-off payment of only €2,500 euros will not improve basic wages.

The union has called the strike in response to the widespread determination of workers to fight. In view of skyrocketing prices, workers are not willing to accept further cuts in real wages. Since Deutsche Bahn is 100 percent state-owned, rail workers are directly confronted with the federal government, i.e., the “traffic light” coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens.

The EVG bureaucracy is closely linked to the federal government and Deutsche Bahn through numerous channels. For years, as the in-house union at Deutsche Bahn, it has openly represented the interests of the corporation. In the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, it agreed with the federal government and rail management on an “alliance for our railroads” that passed the losses due to the pandemic onto the workers. In October 2020, it then signed an early collective agreement cementing a pay freeze for the current year.

This was then to serve a year later as a blueprint for further attacks on train drivers and other crew organized in the Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer (GDL, German Train Drivers' Union). The GDL also strangled any strike action and agreed a contract lowering real wages and guaranteeing Deutsche Bahn a 32-month period of “industrial peace,” i.e., no strikes. For this reason, train drivers will not be able to continue their fight until the autumn.

However, the current collective bargaining battle at Deutsche Bahn is not a repeat of the last contract rounds. It is taking place in a very different political situation.

First, millions of employees in the public sector, postal services, hospitals, schools, etc. are now also in a struggle for decent wages and better working conditions.

Second, these struggles are taking place simultaneously across Europe and around the world. These struggles, involving millions of workers, are also directed against the pro-war policies of every government that has handed over billions to the corporations to assuage the insatiable pursuit of profit by the economic and financial elites.

Railroad workers know a thing or two about this. Over the last 20 years, the railways in Germany have been systematically cut to the bone. One cutback and restructuring program followed the next. The entire infrastructure, which urgently needed to be expanded, was wantonly dismantled, or left to decay. Jobs have been eliminated, wages and working conditions are unacceptable.

The SPD-Green federal government, which ruled from 1998 to 2005

under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), pursued the declared goal of making the railways fit for the stock market. Although this failed, subsequent governments continued these plans to this day.

Those who suffer most are the workers, but also rail customers. Trains are cancelled, run late, become stuck due to staff shortages or the need to renovate the tracks, signals, or switches. Just last week, it became known that the concrete used in Berlin's main train station was literally crumbling and that it was a miracle a serious accident had not already occurred.

The catastrophic train accidents in Greece and Ohio in the United States in recent weeks make it clear that these avoidable disasters are a direct result of this criminal capitalist policy.

The government under Olaf Scholz (SPD), supposedly committed to climate protection, continues this policy unabated. While it is pouring hundreds of billions into war and rearmament, the important social needs of health, postal services, education, and public transport are being attacked and dismantled. The transport minister, for example, prefers to have highways built in the interests of the German auto companies rather than renewing rail infrastructure.

The concerns of the Deutsche Bahn board members are focussed almost exclusively on how they can increase their salaries and bonuses year after year. Even though exact figures are kept secret, in 2020, rail managers raked in more than €500 million in bonuses, and this was in addition to their fat salaries. For the current head of Deutsche Bahn, Richard Lutz, this amounts to some €900,000 euros a year.

Exceptionally, in 2020, the Deutsche Bahn management board waived bonuses under public pressure in the first year of the pandemic. To avoid such annoying losses in future, the board took precautions at the end of last year, creating a new salary structure for senior management. According to *Business Insider*, this involved “concrete improvements” to the pay of 3,000 senior executives. “As a result, compensation became more reliable, crisis-proof, and attractive on January 1, 2023.” The focus, the article said, was on a so-called “pay mix” (of base pay and variable pay). As a result, “crisis effects, such as the pandemic,” would have less impact on total compensation.

According to *Business Insider*, Deutsche Bahn raised managers’ base salaries alone by up to 14 percent starting January 1. The magazine quotes one person with knowledge of the matter as saying, “If you look at the whole package, the bottom line is that managers will probably earn significantly more in the coming years than they do under current conditions.”

This was because, he says, the Executive Board has also guaranteed bonuses to senior executives and expects its Supervisory Board to do the same for itself. The Supervisory Board will fulfill this expectation; after all, tried and tested EVG bureaucrats sit there alongside representatives of the federal government.

The government appoints the chairman of the Supervisory Board, currently Werner Gatzert, the State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Finance. The SPD member had already been appointed department head by Oskar Lafontaine in 1998. The deputy chairman of the Supervisory Board is Martin Burkert, chairman of the EVG. He sat in the Bundestag (federal parliament) for the SPD from 2005 to 2020. In addition, Cosima Ingenschay (SPD), EVG federal manager, and eight other works council chairs of DB subsidiaries sit on the supervisory board.

When Seiler, DB human resources director, now declares that the state-owned company has taken a big step toward the EVG with its offer, rail workers rightly perceive this as a declaration of war. It was only under pressure from EVG members, who expect significantly

higher wages, that the EVG leadership felt compelled to table a wage demand that was unusually high for them. Like the situation at Deutsche Post, where the Verdi union bureaucrats reluctantly had to table a 15 percent wage demand, the EVG is now looking for ways to sabotage rail workers’ willingness to fight.

The open strike-breaking in the postal workers’ wage dispute by Verdi, which overrode an 86 percent strike mandate from its members, must be a warning to rail workers. No sooner had postal workers voted for a strike and begun preparing for one than Verdi reached an agreement with Deutsche Post on cuts in real wages that could not have been worse.

The main reason Verdi junked its members’ strike vote is that it, too, is closely tied to the government and the corporations, and therefore desperately wants to avoid a major, across-the-board strike that would inevitably be directed against the government.

But the disputes at Deutsche Post, in the public sector and, of course, on the railroads continue. Workers’ anger and willingness to fight continue unabated. Everything now depends on workers uniting across the different sectors and building a large strike movement. This can only be done independently and against the union apparatuses and their negotiators. To take the reins of industrial action into their own hands, rank-and-file committees must be formed everywhere.

These must coordinate joint fighting measures by workers on the railroads, in postal services, public services and other areas, in workplace and strike meetings. The rank-and-file committees must ally themselves with striking workers in France, Greece, Britain and other European countries, who everywhere, like rail workers in Germany, face similarly rapacious corporations and the governments who defend them.

We call on rail workers to contact us. Network with your colleagues in the postal and public services. The rank-and-file action committees can be reached by Whatsapp message at the mobile number +491633378340.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact