

German rail workers union negotiates wage cuts after cancelling strike action

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Last weekend, the German Rail and Transport Union (EVG) called off its announced 50-hour warning strike at the last minute. It then agreed to a sellout settlement at the Frankfurt labour court in order to prevent an escalation of the strike.

The rail company had previously filed an urgent motion with the labour court in Frankfurt am Main to obtain an injunction to stop the warning strike. The deal agreed to by the EVG in court is highly dubious. The announcement by the judge that she would follow the assessment of the railway's board and prohibit the warning strike on the grounds of it being "disproportionate" enabled the EVG negotiators to call off the strike without taking responsibility for this betrayal.

In this context, the EVG leadership's judicial settlement with Deutsche Bahn can only be described as a betrayal of its members who had braced themselves for a genuine industrial struggle. The railways, the EVG and the court used the issue of the minimum wage as an excuse to prevent a major strike and reach a quick contract agreement based on the deal agreed to recently by the Verdi union, which involved considerable wage cuts for Germany's public sector workers.

Around 2,000 railway workers earn the German minimum wage of 12 euros an hour only because of bonuses, which are not taken into account in wage increases. The union therefore demanded that the minimum wage be retroactively included in workers' pay scales so that future pay increases would be based on this calculation.

Now the union is seeking to placate its members by claiming that German Rail (Deutsche Bahn) management has "unequivocally declared before the labour court that it will meet our demands on the minimum wage. Against this background, we can now enter into negotiations—provided the employer keeps his word."

The fact that the state-owned company refuses to pay

2,000 workers the minimum wage of 12 euros is in itself an outrage. But the real scandal is that the EVG agreed to years of deals that fobbed off the lowest wage groups with less than 12 euros. Many thousands more workers in the lower wage groups earn only just above the minimum wage. It is precisely these workers in cleaning, maintenance and the security sector who toil day and night under the most difficult conditions and provide more valuable services to society than the entire DB board ever could do.

After the settlement, DB Personnel Director Martin Seiler announced triumphantly: "Deutsche Bahn's trip to the labour court has paid off for everyone." The well-paid EVG bureaucrats of Seiler's in-house union expressed their complete agreement, declaring they had also "expressed their will to continue the collective bargaining negotiations constructively."

In fact, even the demand for a minimum wage was not agreed to in a binding way, and for the remaining 180,000 rail workers, the gulf between their original demand and the company's offer is just as wide as it was before the warning strike was called off.

So far, rail management has promised an inflation compensation premium as well as percentage increases totalling 10 percent for lower and middle incomes and 8 percent for higher incomes to cover a period of 27 months. This amounts to much less than the inflation rate and has nothing in common with the EVG's original demand for 12 percent more or at least 650 euros over a 12-month period.

The union is obviously preparing to agree to a wage cut based on rail management's offer, greased merely by a fractional concession on the minimum wage.

While the DB board is adamantly opposed to reasonable wage increases for its workers, it awards its board members astronomical salaries and increased bonuses. For example, DBahn CEO Richard Lutz received twice as

much in salary in 2022 as in the previous year—including bonuses—totalling 2.24 million euros. Chief Infrastructure Officer Berthold Huber and Chief Human Resources Officer Martin Seiler took a leaf from the same book and also doubled their salaries to around 1.4 million euros. According to research by Business Insider, all DB executives were due to receive 14 percent more in basic salaries per month starting in January 2023.

Instead of confronting the arrogant and intransigent railway DB board, initiating a ballot and organising an all-out strike, the EVG leadership crawls on its knees and begs for a new offer. The union leadership is desperate to prevent a real struggle, because it would be directly aimed against the Germany government as the owner of the railways.

The next official round of negotiations with Deutsche Bahn is due to take place in Fulda on 23 and 24 May. Everything points to the fact that the EVG has already agreed to far-reaching concessions behind the backs of the rail workforce.

In order to prevent a real wage cut, it is necessary to break free from the control of the EVG bureaucracy. Rank-and-file rail workers must organise themselves independently, prepare an all-out strike and take the conduct of the fight into their own hands. Workers in the public sector, at post offices and in other sectors have started to build independent action committees. This is now the most important and urgent task in the rail workers collective bargaining struggle.

It is not too late. The sellout of the EVG can still be prevented. There is no lack of willingness to fight. Previous warning strikes have made that very clear.

A look back at past contract disputes shows how wrong it would be to place any hopes in the EVG bureaucracy. For years, the EVG, as the in-house trade union of the railways, has openly represented the interests of the company. In the first year of the COVID-19 crisis, the union agreed with the government and the rail management to a so-called “Alliance for Our Railways,” which passed on the income losses resulting from the pandemic to the company’s employees. Then, in October 2020, the union signed an early contract agreement involving no increase in salaries for the current year.

The dispute at the railways is part of an international upsurge of class struggle involving ever broader layers of the working class. In the public sector, more than 2.5 million workers—airport workers, nurses, kindergarten teachers, rubbish collectors, etc.— went into struggle against wage cuts and attacks on social conditions. Strikes

and protests are on the rise across Europe.

In France, President Macron is pushing through a drastic reduction in pensions against the will of the vast majority. He has responded to the mass resistance to his proposals with brutal police violence. In Germany, the governing coalition is investing hundreds of billions of euros into war and rearmament, while the country’s social infrastructure decays and wages tumble.

These attacks can only be beaten back if workers unite across all sectors and internationally and organise independently of the union bureaucrats, who are in lockstep with governments and corporations everywhere.

This is why the building of independent action committees, led by trusted workers and over which the trade union apparatus has no influence, is so important. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party have taken the initiative to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to advance and coordinate the building of action committees internationally.

The first task of action committees on the railways must be to prevent a sellout by the EVG and fight for an indefinite strike. The aim must be to achieve a collective agreement that fully compensates for inflation and the income losses of past years.

The action committees must become the starting point of the struggle for a society in which the working class—the great majority—takes charge and prioritises human need rather than the profits of a rich and super rich minority, i.e., for a society organised according to socialist principles.

We call on rail workers to get in touch with us. Network with your colleagues in the postal and public services. The action committees can be reached by Whatsapp message to the mobile number +49-163-337 8340. You can also register using the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)