

Germany: Train drivers union leader turns union into a temporary employment agency

Marianne Arens, Peter Schwarz
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On January 23 the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) founded a cooperative called Fair Train e.G. The first seven members of the cooperative include the head of the GDL, Claus Weselsky, and his designated successor, Mario Reiss. The cooperative is a temporary employment agency that is to "lend" train drivers to rail transport companies.

The GDL wants to "set new standards," Weselsky explained on June 5. The project was presented that day together with the union's wage demands at a GDL general meeting, and then presented to the media in Berlin. The GDL claims that with Fair Train it has "founded a company that offers fair conditions when it comes to hiring out locomotive drivers." Weselsky enthused to his members that the "centuries-old model of cooperatives" would solve all their problems.

In fact, the opposite is the case. The cooperative is a trap and every train driver should be aware of it. It marks a new stage in the transformation of trade unions into tools of the big corporations and into companies exploiting the workers themselves.

By setting up its own temporary work agency, the GDL is maneuvering its members into a dangerous situation. The latter are expected to resign from the government-owned Deutsche Bahn (German Rail) and other companies, and put decades of social gains at risk in order to sign on with the newly founded Fair Train. A capitalist manager, Peter Bosse, who has been head of human resources at various companies for 22 years, most recently at the insolvent Abellio Rail NRW and Vias Rail, has been appointed CEO.

In view of the current extreme lack of staff, the GDL promises it will lend train drivers to the railway companies on better terms than they are currently employed. But this is an utterly naive calculation. Who will pay for training, sick pay, company pensions and—in the case of drivers who have attained civil service status—government pensions? What happens when train drivers are dismissed by the rail companies? As temporary workers they cannot claim proper protection against dismissal and Fair Train will not be able to continue paying their salaries for long.

Fair Train also wants to make a profit, Weselsky emphasised. "Not only are we opening a company, but it will very quickly operate economically to make profits for the benefit of all."

Since it is a cooperative, the profit will be distributed to members. But before that happens, operating costs, a huge bureaucratic apparatus and the board salaries of Fair Train have to be financed, which, based on experience, will not be modest. The

loaned-out train drivers will receive only a fraction of what the rail companies pay Fair Train for its services.

Fair Train also has to compete in the capitalist market against tough competition from personnel companies like MEV and rail companies that have been in the business for years and can draw on extensive international resources. Fair Train is explicitly committed to the capitalist market economy. On its website, it cites "free-market action" as its first principle—i.e., before "fair wages" and "socially acceptable working conditions."

In an interview with Tilo Jung as part of his "Young and Naive" format, Weselsky replied in the following manner to a question about Karl Marx: "We're not in a class war, we're in a market economy." Again and again Weselsky stressed the importance of making profits. "A business that does not make a profit is not a business."

What's more, Deutsche Bahn will certainly use the GDL initiative to set up its own temporary employment agencies and outsource important areas of rail operations, as many large corporations have been doing for a long time. The whole process amounts to a kind of Ryan Air-isation of the railways. Low-cost airline Ryan Air has perfected the system of outsourcing and using contract labour, employing pilots and crews at rock-bottom wages.

This treacherous move by the GDL effectively amounts to dividing the rail workforce and banning them from striking. The spin-off into a temporary employment agency drives a wedge between train drivers and the other railway workers, thereby undermining any common struggle. In fact, it means giving up the right to strike, because the train drivers' employers are then no longer the rail companies, but Fair Train—that is, according to Weselsky, the drivers themselves.

In the 19th century, Catholic and Protestant social reformers like Adolph Kolping and Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, to whom Weselsky explicitly refers, founded cooperatives, consumer associations and people's banks to protect farmers, craftsmen, small traders and workers from the worst excesses of big business. At the start of the 20th century, the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg denounced such attempts to "change the sea of capitalist bitterness into a sea of socialist sweetness, by progressively pouring into it bottles of social reformist lemonade."

Kolping and Raiffeisen decisively rejected a socialist perspective, which at that time was gaining massive popularity in the form of support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Raiffeisen, born in the same year as Marx, never questioned the

capitalist profit system and the state and rejected communists and socialists as a “subversive party.”

In the 21st century, when global financial groups and corporations dominate economic life in every country, such concepts are utterly reactionary. Neither train drivers nor any other section of workers can defend their incomes and rights as independent forces in a capitalist market dominated by billionaire monopolies. This can only be done with the methods of class struggle. They must unite across professions, sectors and countries and jointly confront the corporations and the entire capitalist system.

This is precisely what the GDL’s initiative seeks to prevent at all costs.

The GDL and Weselsky

The professional union GDL came to prominence in 2007 and 2008 when it led an 11-week strike. Many railway workers subsequently left the rival EVG union, which was firmly in the hands of railway management and turned to the supposedly more militant GDL. The German government reacted to this and similar developments in aviation, where the flight attendants’ union UFO and the pilots’ union Cockpit organised strikes, by introducing its Collective Bargaining Unity Act, which massively restricted the rights of smaller unions.

In 2014 and 2015, the GDL again organised nationwide strikes lasting several days, which, among other things, were directed against the Collective Bargaining Unity Act. At the time, the Socialist Equality Party defended the GDL against the government’s attacks, but warned that due to its narrow perspective as a professional union it would stab the strikers in the back.

The train drivers and conductors are “confronted with political tasks and a political struggle,” we wrote. “This has become clearly visible in the past few days. Weselsky used every opportunity to make clear to the federal government that he did not want to fight against it, but rather work with it.”

What is needed, we said, is an international and socialist perspective: “Weselsky and the GDL pretend that even in an age of global crisis a national union can defend the interests of workers if it is merely a little more militant and less corrupt. But this is an illusion. In reality, the struggle to defend workers’ rights and gains directly raises the question of political perspective. And here the sectional unions agree with the mainstream DGB unions, despite other conflicts. Both recognise the capitalist profit system.”

Since then, the GDL has repeatedly sold out industrial action. In September 2021, it called off a strike shortly before the federal election and agreed a miserable wage settlement. “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 radicalisation of the working class,” we commented at the time.

Last Monday, the GDL also announced its demands for the upcoming contract negotiations, due in the autumn. Despite record inflation, the demands are lower than those of the EVG, which has been forced to organise two nationwide warning strikes in recent weeks due to pressure from its members, and is now desperately trying to sell them out. In addition to a onetime tax-free inflation premium of €3,000 [\$US 3,281], the GDL is only demanding a monthly €555 extra for a period of 12 months. It is also demanding some improvements in working times.

A few weeks ago, the GDL already accepted a substantial real wage reduction at two SWEG rail companies in Baden-Württemberg, with pay increases of just 4.8 percent over 22 months.

The initiative to outsource train drivers into a temporary employment agency controlled by the GDL, represents a new low for the union. Under conditions where powerful class struggles are developing worldwide, the GDL is seeking to isolate train drivers and maneuver them into a dead end. Its latest proposal provides yet another reason why workers must break with the union bureaucracies. The answer can only be for workers to unite internationally in independent action committees.

Among train drivers and railway workers, Weselsky’s project has so far met with scant approval. Comments expressing scepticism and rejection are multiplying online.

One worker sarcastically writes: “Yo, all railway workers know how great temporary employment agencies are.” “Shouldn’t temporary workers earn a good 30 percent more?” asks one critic on the net. Another writes: “Market economy in our neoliberal sense creates class struggles.” And still another writes, “Why should a railway make profits? That doesn’t work. Transport must be oriented towards the common good, not profit!” and refers in particular to the issue of safety.

Even at the GDL general meeting, sceptical voices were raised. “We have to digest this first,” said one driver. “Is this meant to be a personnel service provider now?” Another one asked whether it was possible to sign up for a part-time job first without immediately giving up one’s full time job at DB. Another pointed out that “not everyone has €500 at their disposal without further ado.” And yet another pointed out that a whole section of train drivers enjoyed civil servant status. “Should we give that up now?”



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