

EVG rail union agrees to arbitration with Deutsche Bahn, calls off strike

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In a betrayal of the fight of rail workers, the EVG union has called off its warning strike and accepted the offer of arbitration by national rail operator Deutsche Bahn.

The EVG executive could not have demonstrated more clearly that it wants to avoid industrial action at all costs. During the arbitration process, which can last several weeks, the union is obliged to maintain an “industrial peace.”

When EVG announced a strike ballot among its 110,000 or so members last week, the Action Committee of Transport Workers warned railway workers: “Don’t fool yourselves, the EVG is playing a double game. While they are initiating the ballot, they are continuing talks with the management behind your backs and preparing a sell-out.”

That is exactly what has happened. Since the announcement of the strike ballot, EVG chair Martin Burkert has taken part in one confidential meeting after another. He spoke with Deutsche Bahn (DB) executive and supervisory board members and with transport politicians and the government, which owns 100 percent of DB. On Tuesday and Wednesday, Burkert attended a two-day meeting of the DB Supervisory Board, where he is Deputy Chairman. He also sits on the supervisory boards of DB Cargo and local transit operator S-Bahn Berlin.

On the basis of information originating from the head of the EVG, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned this week that rail freight transport was in the red. As a result, 10,000 jobs at DB Cargo could be at risk. Of course, such information is not intended to prepare a fight by railway workers. Rather, the union is seeking to paralyse resistance and create a mood of resignation and intimidation, demonstrating the EVG is incapable of conducting a principled struggle.

By contrast the Action Committee of Transport Workers stated, “It is necessary to take the strike preparations into our own hands. No trust in the EVG!” The committee calls on train drivers and all railway workers to build up an independent rank-and-file action committee, to make contact with other sections of workers and to organise collective resistance independently of the trade union apparatus. It is the only way in which wages and working conditions can be defended.

In this context, a joint warning strike by railway workers with public sector workers at the end of March demonstrated what fighting potential the working class can unleash. For one day, air, rail and local traffic throughout the country was paralysed. But shortly afterwards, in May, the EVG cancelled its announced 50-hour strike at short notice demonstrating that together with the DB board and the federal government, it is prepared to abandon railway workers to the low-wage trap.

DB workers have been without a collective agreement for months. The last collective agreement for around 200,000 railway workers expired at the end of February. Their anger and willingness to strike is high, since they have forgone wage increases for three years since the then EVG leader Klaus-Dieter Hommel introduced his grovelling “Alliance for our Railways.” This imposed a wage freeze and allowed the DB board to save two billion euros in personnel costs.

Since then, the situation has become worse and worse. The coronavirus pandemic was followed by the Ukraine war, which the German government is using to push through the biggest military build-up since the end of the Second World War. All the trade unions—including the EVG—are collaborating with the government and playing a decisive role in passing on

the costs of the war to working people in the form of low wages and increased exploitation.

In the negotiations, which have now been going on for four months, the government and the DB board have shown that they want to make an example of railway workers. They are seeking a contract with a duration of at least two years that will further reduce real wages. DB executives can expect astronomical pay and bonus increases, but workers are to be fobbed off with peanuts.

For years, train drivers, conductors and on-board caterers have been working extremely irregular and long shift hours that make a private life almost impossible. As for the railway workers who toil outside, along the tracks and in the stations in all weathers, they are fobbed off with low wages that are sometimes even below the collectively agreed minimum wage. But since the end of 2020, food prices have increased by 31 percent and energy prices by as much as 50 percent, and there is no end in sight.

The EVG has already abandoned its original demand—12 percent for all, but at least €650 monthly wage increase for a maximum of twelve months—when it reached a deal with the companies of the Transdev Group on 20 June. Transdev (which owns a number of local transit operations) is the largest rail transport company in Germany after DB. EVG accepted a contract in which wages will only be raised by €290 from 1 November 2023 and by a further €130 from 1 August 2024 (€150 and €70 for “junior staff”); even lower amounts were agreed for the Transdev service company. The new Transdev contract runs for 21 months! At Deutsche Bahn, the board has made it clear that it is not prepared to go below a 24-month contract term.

The EVG, like IG Metall, Verdi and all other unions, stands on the side of the federal and state governments and the employers. The GDL train drivers’ union is not an alternative either. With the contract for its members expiring in the autumn, the GDL’s demands are below those of the EVG. And what is even worse: the GDL is actively contributing to the division of railway workers by setting up a new temporary work agency “Fairtrain,” disguised as a cooperative. In doing so, the GDL itself becomes an employer exploiting workers, exposing train drivers who agree to work for “Fairtrain” to competition from rival temporary

employment agencies (because, according to GDL head Claus Weselsky, “a business that does not make a profit is not a business”).

All over the world, workers are participating in strikes and mass protests against the consequences of war, high inflation, job cuts, social inequality and the criminal handling of the pandemic by the ruling elite. Railway workers are also part of this development. Recently, a railway worker at the Berlin-Rummelsburg depot told WSWs reporters, “We should all go on strike and paralyse the whole company. Here in the company everyone thinks like that.” This clearly shows that the time is ripe to build an independent action committee at the railways as well.



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