

German Rail dispute: Vote against the arbitrator's decision and for an indefinite strike!

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Last Wednesday, the arbitration commission in Germany's long running rail workers contract dispute presented its offer, three days earlier than anticipated. The offer differs only slightly from the original offer made by the management of German Rail, which included a huge real wage cut to be implemented over an extremely long term of 27 months—and had met with massive resistance from railway workers.

Despite this, the Rail and Transport Union (EVG) immediately stoked up its propaganda machine and praised the mediation recommendation in the highest terms as a “fair compromise.” Using arithmetical tricks, obfuscation and open misrepresentation, the result was recommended to the workers by the union.

EVG negotiator Kristian Loroach began his promotion of the deal by expressing his appreciation for the two officially appointed mediators: “I thank Prof. Heide Pfarr and Dr. Thomas de Maizièrè for their conciliation efforts.”

Both Pfarr and de Maizièrè represent the interests of the German government, which fully owns the railways. Heide Pfarr has been a Social Democratic Party functionary for over fifty years, was a senator in Berlin and a state minister in Hesse and is in close contact with the German chancellor Olaf Scholz. De Maizièrè (Christian Democratic Union) is a former Federal Minister of the Interior and Defence.

Loroach went on to say that no final agreement had been reached with the conciliation, only a recommendation. He said that the EVG saw “clear strengths” in the recommendation and called for its adoption. He then claimed that the offer meant “a permanent double-digit wage increase for the vast majority of our membership”—an increase “not seen on this scale in Germany for decades.”

The union official listed: “pay increases in almost all areas by 410 euros”; a “one-off payment so our colleagues get money quickly”: “train dispatchers and train controllers will get up to 900 euros more,” which corresponds to a “wage increase of about 30 per cent;” train conductors “will get up to 840 euros more,” a wage increase of 22 percent; workshop employees and maintenance workers 24 percent wage increase, and so on. These figures were then repeated countless times in the media,

but that does not change the fact that the claims about the deal are a fraud.

In reality, the arbitration recommendation means massive real wage cuts!

Instead of the original demand for a monthly increase of 650 euros over a term of 12 months, the arbitration result offers just 410 euros over a term of 25 months, i.e., 197 euros per month, less than a third of the original demand. In addition, there is to be a one-off payment of 2,850 euros, but this does not affect the basic wage and future salaries.

If the arbitration award is accepted, a railway employee will earn on average about 15 percent less in real terms when the contract expires in spring 2025 than in September 2020, when the railways management and the EVG agreed on the now expired Corona collective agreement. During the long term of this contract, salaries have only increased by 1.5 percent, while consumer prices have risen by 17.1 percent, according to the Federal Statistical Office. In fact, the price increases for food, energy and rents were much higher. Real wages have therefore fallen by more than 15.6 percent since 2020.

With the arbitrator's decision, nominal wages will rise by an average of 11 percent in two stages, on 1 December 2023 and 1 August 2024, according to the railway's personnel director Martin Seiler. The EVG quotes a figure of 14.2 percent, but this is mere propaganda aimed at making the deal palatable.

In the last 12 months, consumer prices have risen by 6.5 percent. If they continue to rise at this rate, they will be 13 percent higher by the time the collective agreement expires. This means that the contract's raises would not even compensate for current inflation. Even if the rate of inflation turns out to be lower, the deal would not even begin to make up for the huge real wage cuts during the pandemic.

The EVG has announced that a ballot will be held on the arbitration proposal and is now sending its officials into factories and workshops to intimidate workers and threaten that, if they reject the deal, they will also lose the one-off inflation payment.

This will not be easy for the bureaucrats. There is widespread anger about such blackmail and the role of the EVG. Angry

comments are piling up on Facebook and Twitter.

Murat K. writes: “I am bitterly disappointed. I had high hopes with our demands at the beginning of the year, but now it is all for nothing.

“At the beginning they insisted on not accepting a one-off payment, but now they are accepting it. They didn’t want to accept arbitration; in the end they even offered it on their own initiative.

“It is not surprising that especially young colleagues are no longer interested in trade unions.

“We had our last pay rise in 2018. The 1.5% rise in the Corona year is not worth talking about. Basically, we are facing another pay cut. This is bitter for all the colleagues who keep this place running with extra shifts, overtime, and no appreciation.

“I will definitely vote for a strike, and I hope that other colleagues will do the same.”

Andreas S. writes: “The arbitration recommendation must be rejected!!! This is all just a joke!!! That’s only 10 euro more than the big bad offer from Seiler!!!! Reject it in the ballot!!! We need indefinite strikes!!!!”

Michael K notes: “There must be a definite NO to this offer, I hope there will be at least 75 percent voting NO. All the time they said the inflation compensation was not included in the negotiations, now they use the inflation compensation again. Now only a general strike counts. The railway board is shoving money into their pockets and the ordinary worker is being screwed again.”

Rail workers must reject the arbitrator’s decision in the ballot. But that alone is not enough to organise an indefinite all-out strike and realise the justified and necessary original demand. The EVG will sabotage the ballot result as did the Verdi union in the post office dispute when 86 percent voted for strike action. The union is in cahoots with the German government and the arrogant railway management, which is lining its own pockets.

While the DB executive adamantly opposes reasonable wage increases, it has authorised astronomical salary and bonus increases for its board members. In 2022, for example, Deutsche Bahn CEO Lutz received twice as much salary as in the previous year—including bonuses, around 2.24 million euros. The Chief Infrastructure Officer Berthold Huber and Chief Human Resources Officer Martin Seiler both doubled their salaries to around 1.4 million euros. According to research by Business Insider, all executives received 14 percent more basic salary per month from January 2023.

In order to overturn the arbitrator’s decision, the strike ballot must be made the start of a rebellion against the EVG. Rail workers must organise independently and take the strike preparation into their own hands. Workers in the public sector, at the post office and in other sectors have started to build independent action committees. This is now the most important and urgent task for the railways. It is not too late—a sell-out by

the EVG can be prevented. There is no lack of willingness to fight. The past warning strikes have shown that very clearly.

The contract struggle at the railways is part of an international upsurge of class struggle in which ever broader layers of the working class are taking part. In the public sector, more than two-and-a-half million—airport workers, nurses, kindergarten teachers, rubbish collectors, etc. have taken part in the struggle against real wage cuts and social cuts. Strikes and protests are increasing worldwide.

The German government is spending hundreds of billions of euros on war and rearmament and making the working class pay. Social infrastructure is crumbling, and real wages are being cut.

These attacks can only be repulsed if workers unite across sectors and internationally and organise independently of the unions, which are in the pockets of governments and corporations everywhere.

This is why the building of independent action committees, led by trusted workers and outside the control of the trade union apparatus is so important. 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 rail action committees is to prevent a sellout by EVG and fight for an indefinite strike.

The inflation and income losses of the past years must be fully compensated. The action committees must become the starting point for the struggle for a society in which the working class—the great majority—takes charge and in which human needs, not the profits of the rich, come first, i.e., for a society organised according to socialist principles.

We call on railway 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.



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