Founding meeting of the German Railworkers' Rank-and-File Committee agrees to fight against arbitration result and against division of the workforce

Our reporters
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The founding meeting of the German Railworkers' Rank-and-File Committee took place on Tuesday evening, attended by over 60 railworkers, along with active and former transport workers from other companies and other supporters.

There was significant interest in the inaugural online meeting. Many were unable to attend due to shift work, but some had nevertheless logged on at work and listened in together with their colleagues. Klaus, a former railway worker, originally from South America, joined in to express his solidarity. In the end, the resolution calling for a vigorous offensive against the arbitration agreement and the preparation of a strike was overwhelmingly adopted.

The resolution begins by describing the conception of the committee:

> The Railworkers' Rank-and-File Committee is an association of railroad workers with and without union membership who are no longer willing to accept the domination of the EVG rail union apparatus. It is not the EVG officials, many of whom sit on the supervisory board and have long ago been bought off, who decide but the rank and file. Our goal is to fight off the massive attacks on our wages and working conditions. Our rights to decent wages and tolerable working conditions take precedence over the profit interests of the rail board, investors and speculators.

Dietmar Gaisenkersting, a journalist for the *World Socialist Web Site* who has written extensively about the struggle by railworkers, introduced the discussion. Whenever he spoke about the impact of the conciliation agreement and the role of the EVG union officials, participants gave the thumbs up emoji as a sign of support; for example, when he said that the great willingness to fight had forced the EVG to call many thousands of warning strikes, which then partially paralysed the whole country.

However, instead of preparing and organising a strike after the failure of the contract negotiations, the EVG had "participated in the arbitration process and accepted a result that hardly differed from the last offer made by Deutsche Bahn."

The reduction in real wages now being pushed through was huge and affected everyone, Gaisenkersting said. The EVG was planning to push this through, "with the old means of division. Some—especially the lower paid groups—will get more," and more senior groups would face cuts.

Railway workers expressed their displeasure in the chat and in the subsequent discussion. "We have been betrayed, sold out and exploited. The EVG has only decided in favour of the railways," said Karsten. Another recalled: "The EVG has betrayed railway workers several times." He had "turned his back on this union a long time ago."

Timo reported, "In our group, the chat is already running hot from the propaganda of the works council representatives that the arbitrator's decision was so great and that it should be accepted at all costs."

André asked, "Can the voting result be trusted at all? Who controls the vote?" He added, "The more people know the content of the arbitrator's ruling, the more will reject it. I have seen that bus drivers only get paid if they stayed healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. If we make these things transparent and put them in people's hands, we will be much more."

Diana from Duisburg hoped "that we can get the 75 percent ["No"] vote to reject the arbitration deal, because many people have already cancelled their EVG membership in protest. I started working for Deutsche Bahn in 1993 and have been with the company for 30 years now. I can understand that some people are considering agreeing to the outcome because they want money now, because things like electricity costs and gas bills are up in the air. The one-off payment [inflation compensation] is a lot of money for some people."

She pointed out that the cuts in real wages had far-reaching consequences. "You also have to look at it in the longer term. The less wage increase we have, the less we pay into the pension fund. The pension system is already a farce. Young people who are starting to work for the railways or elsewhere will have to work for

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another 50 years. Some of us on the railways don't even earn minimum wage. That is insane. Even now, people can't manage on their pensions. If everything becomes more expensive, what will people be able to afford at retirement age? Then you go and collect bottles, if there are any deposit bottles left at all."

One participant raised the question of how to respond when EVG officials claimed there was allegedly no support among the population for a strike by railway workers. To this Gaisenkersting replied: "An indefinite massive strike at the railways stops the whole country and has the character of a general strike. That's what everyone in the corporate executive suites fears and also in the EVG bureaucracy."

Other workers would welcome such a signal for a general strike, they were literally waiting for it, he said. "Finally, someone is taking up the fight against the constant attacks, against the deterioration of working conditions, against the falling real wages, because everything is getting more and more expensive, but wages cannot keep up," Gaisenkersting explained. "That would have an enormous resonance."

The question of why the EVG was using its entire apparatus to prevent a strike to enforce the original demand, and whether the train drivers' union GDL was an alternative, led to a discussion about the character of trade unions as a whole.

"The trade union apparatuses are part of the capitalist system of exploitation," explained WSWS writer Ulrich Rippert. "Their functionaries sit on company supervisory boards and are part of the management, they even call themselves that: co-managers." People like EVG chair Martin Burkert moved from the union executive to the Bundestag (parliament) and back. One of his predecessors, Norbert Hansen, had moved from the union to the Deutsche Bahn board.

Almost the entire EVG leadership was in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Rippert said: Martin Burkert, Cosima Ingenschay, Frank Hauenstein, the EVG press spokesperson Anne Jacobs and many more. They were in the same party, the SPD, as Chancellor Scholz and went in and out of the Bundestag (parliament). They supported the federal government in enforcing cuts in real wages, which they had agreed on last year, not only at the railways but also in other sectors such as Deutsche Post or the public service, where action committees were also being set up.

The GDL train drivers union was not an alternative to the EVG in this respect, said Rippert. "Christian has just posted this in the chat: [GDL leader Claus] Weselsky is a member of the Christian Democrats (CDU). He represents not only conservative, but very right-wing positions. He is also completely on the side of the federal government and the Deutsche Bahn board and only wants to channel the resentment that exists among the EVG members into the GDL."

It was not only the EVG and the GDL that are completely on the side of the companies and the government. The same applied to Verdi, IG Metall, IGBCE and all other trade unions, he said. "That is why it is important that we organise independently," Rippert concluded.

WSWS writers and members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), who support the formation of action committees, joined in the discussion, explaining that the current collective bargaining struggle at Deutsche Bahn was part of a broader development. For many years there had been a systematic reduction of wages and social benefits. The average income of a top manager in Germany's leading corporations last year was €3.2 million, more than 40 times as much as the average worker.

The Ukraine war had drastically widened this gap. The costs of military rearmament were being imposed on the backs of working people through wage cuts and social austerity programmes.

The resolution therefore states that the struggle against wage reductions must be linked to the struggle against war and rearmament.

Because all the problems of the past were coming back—poverty, war, dictatorship and the growth of fascist parties—Rippert appealed for fighting for an international socialist programme.

A railway worker from east Germany then spoke, and emphasised that he had "lived under socialism for 30 years" and did not want to go back there. Rippert underlined the contrast between socialism and Stalinism: "For us workers in particular it is very important to oppose this big lie and falsification of history, which equates the crimes of the Stalinist dictatorship in the GDR [former East Germany] and the Soviet Union with socialism. Socialism is not the past but the future."

It was agreed to discuss these issues further at the next meeting.

After a lively discussion, the resolution was then passed, which provides a programme for workers to prevent the sell-out by the EVG and fight for their rights. It concludes with the following immediate actions that must be taken:

• No to the arbitration offer! Support an offensive campaign against it! Organize meetings in all EVG locals and company groups to discuss why the arbitration offer must be rejected.

• No faith in the EVG board! The current ballot must take place under the full control of the rank and file. Trustworthy colleagues must monitor the service provider of the online election and especially the calculation and dissemination of results. The results must be transparent and verifiable.

• Prepare strikes! The federal board of the EVG wants to prevent a strike and accordingly has not made any preparations. No weeks of delays between the rejection of the arbitration offer and the strike!

• In order to enforce this, we call on all our colleagues to form rank-and-file committees in their work sites and branches that are committed to the interests of all employees—even beyond the EVG. We are reaching out to colleagues from the GDL (Gewerkschaft deuscher Lokführer, engineers' union), other unions or unorganized workers who are serious about defending our common interests.

We call on all railway workers who support these measures to join the action committee! Get in touch via Whatsapp on +49-163-337 8340 and also register via the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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