

German railroad workers speak out about union arbitration and working conditions

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Workers organized in the German Railway and Transport Union (EVG) have until Friday to vote on whether to accept the arbitration agreement presented to them by the union leadership. Many EVG members have reported to the WSWS that they and their colleagues have already voted “no.” In the works there are continuing discussions about about setting up rank-and-file committees to organize independently of the EVG.

Workers are furious about the conciliation agreement that the EVG leadership has recommended. As the WSWS has detailed, the 140 pages of the conciliation recommendation contain numerous exceptions and special provisions that expose the supposed €410 per month wage increase touted by the EVG as a sham. In fact, the closer one examines the details of the agreement, the worse it gets.

It is well known that Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German rail company owned by the federal government, was recently forced to raise the wages of low-bracket employees to the legal minimum.

Many received only marginally more. Moreover, the agreements contained in the conciliation contract will not only further reduce workers’ paltry wages in real terms, but will also lock in or even worsen the miserable working conditions.

Torsten from Ostwestfalen-Lippe, a DB public transport bus driver, described his working conditions: “We have a break room in the Old Market, there used to be bottled water you could help yourself to,” he said. He explained that now they have DB drinking bottles that they can fill up. “But I’m on the road and not in the yard until the evening, so I have to get my own water.”

The sanitary facilities are also a disaster, he said. “We have a container with two urinals and two toilets for 50 bus drivers. But at least one urinal and one toilet are always broken.”

Previously, he said, when they were still part of Public

Services and not DB, they had a large and pleasant break room. “But DB stopped renting it and put us in a container instead,” Torsten reported.

But the worst part, he said, are the wages. His last monthly salary in the public sector in 2010 was almost €3,100 gross. Some 13 years later at DB, he makes less than €2,300. “That’s a net of around €1,500 per month for a 38.5-hour week on six weekdays and on-call duty,” he explained.

For many years, Torsten and a colleague were shop representatives for the EVG. “But neither of us does that anymore, it doesn’t make sense, you’re talking to a wall,” he said. Neither EVG nor DB showed up, and his works council chairman from EVG is retiring next year. “He’s not doing anything anymore.” Torsten is himself retiring in a few years, but said, “I feel sorry for my younger colleagues.”

Frank works for DB Netze in overhead line maintenance. His colleagues usually work from 6:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and twice a month on the night shift from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. In addition, there are on-call shifts from 3:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. He managed to get an exception from shift work for health reasons.

But because of that he is denied bonuses and given the lowest possible income, €2,400 a month. “That’s €1,700 after taxes,” he stated. “For that, I work in places where I can fall, get run over, or die from 15,000 volts in the overhead line.” When something happens, the railroad always turns things around “so that the person affected is to blame.”

Frank is furious at the EVG. “That bought-and-paid EVG pretends to fight hard to get more wages out. At company meetings, the EVG and rail bosses laud each other as if they’d accomplished something amazing.” He reports that constantly deteriorating working conditions and low pay were also affecting the work atmosphere. “We used to be a sworn team, ready for any outrage, but

today everyone only does what they absolutely have to do.” He concluded, “Away with the EVG.”

A dispatcher at DB Netze AG likewise described the unbearable working conditions. She said that when she started working for Deutsche Bahn more than 20 years ago, she felt comfortable. “Now we’re just being wrung out.” Six shifts per week are not uncommon. As a dispatcher, she suffers along with her colleagues from the constant shortage of staff and the underfunded “dilapidated” infrastructure. “We sit at work every day and try to pull the cart out of the mud,” she said. “But behind us, where we’re pulling the cart, there is just more mud.”

For years she and her colleagues have had to work extra hours. “We go home every day sweating wet because of the stress. I’m over 40 now and work shifts, even at night.” Her personal life suffers as a result, she said.

Yasar has been working as a dispatcher in the Production Department (PD) for eight years. He spoke of the low wages many in the group receive. “That’s insane for a state-owned company,” he said. He also pointed to the staff shortage. “I sometimes have 70 to 80 hours of overtime a month,” he reported. “The EVG works council waves that through.”

He has passed around the resolution of the Railworkers’ Rank-and-File Committee among his colleagues. “Almost everyone here voted ‘no’ in the ballot.” He pointed out that EVG sent out the access data for the strike ballot, which was conducted online, by mail. “while three German states are on summer vacation.”

Mustafa, who works at DB Cargo and is discussing the establishment of a rank-and-file committee with his colleagues, reported that “everyone is mad.” Because “They don’t just take the money out of your pocket, but also from your family. They manage to make me—with two children—work day shifts at the station for two weeks at a stretch.”

The fact that the EVG is now promoting this miserable agreement as the “best agreement of all time” annoyed him. The EVG is “a company that does nothing for the employees,” he said. “It’s time to put a stop to them.”

That is why he supports the establishment of the Railworkers’ Rank-and-File Committee. “I think it’s good that the rank-and-file committee, independent of the union, wants to unite everyone”—members of EVG, locomotive drivers’ union GDL and even those who are not in any union.

If EVG wins approval for the arbitration agreement, there will soon be fewer EVG members. Many employees

told us that they themselves and many of their colleagues would then leave the EVG.

A vote rejecting the arbitrator’s agreement is an important first step. But this will not be enough to secure an adequate increase in wages and improve working conditions.

The EVG will do everything in its power to ram through the arbitration agreement so as to prevent a strike over the original set of workers’ demands. The German service union Verdi demonstrated at the German Post that the union apparatuses ignore their own statutes and rules. In March of this year, 86 percent of postal workers voted for a strike, but Verdi refused to organize a strike, simply renegotiating and then ramming through a barely modified collective agreement.

Verdi and the EVG are in bed with the arrogant corporate management at the Post and the Rail, who are busy lining their own pockets, as well as with the federal government. The federal coalition government in Berlin is spending hundreds of billions of euros on war and rearmament and making workers pay for it. Social infrastructure is crumbling and real wages are falling.

The arbitration ballot must become the start of a rebellion against the EVG. Railroad workers must organize independently and take strike preparation into their own hands. They are not alone. The collective bargaining conflict at the Deutsche Bahn is part of an international upsurge of class struggle in which ever larger sections of the working class are taking part, in Germany and worldwide. In October, the GDL’s contract negotiations with the railroads will begin. GDL members are confronted with the same issues as their colleagues at EVG.

Building local rank-and-file committees, independent of the bureaucratic union apparatus, must now be the top priority.

We call on railroad workers to contact the newly established Railworkers’ Rank-and-File Committee. Send a Whatsapp message to the mobile number +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact