

Railway workers in Germany express enormous opposition to sell-out contract

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According to the Railway and Transport Workers' Union (EVG), a narrow majority of 52.3 percent of its members accepted the arbitration offer from national rail carrier Deutsche Bahn. Almost two-thirds of the members took part in the ballot. The EVG national executive board only announced this at a press conference on Monday afternoon, a full three days after the conclusion of the ballot.

The first reaction of many EVG members and railway workers was disbelief and mistrust. The prevailing mood among was against the offer and in favour of strike action.

But even if the ballot result is correct, and this needs to be verified, it is a vote of no confidence in the EVG and an expression of huge opposition. Although the EVG exerted massive pressure, and the federal executive committee recommended acceptance, not even a third of those entitled to vote voted in favour of the conciliation result. Just under a third rejected it and another third did not participate in the ballot.

It can be assumed that many voted yes because they believed no better result could be achieved with this union, and not because they supported the outcome.

The EVG had made it clear from the beginning that it did not want an all-out strike, despite members clear determination to fight. It merely held two warning strikes, which meant heavy wage losses for the participants, with the EVG sitting firmly on the strike fund and not paying out strike money.

When a ballot on a full strike could no longer be postponed, the EVG executive board went into arbitration with Deutsche Bahn (DB). It then combined the strike ballot with a vote on the conciliation outcome. In this way, it wanted to ensure that 75 per cent--and not only 50 percent as in a simple vote--were required for a rejection and a decision to strike.

At the press conference on Monday, the EVG executive board tried to gloss over the result and present it as a great

success. The lower wage groups would receive a strong increase, the EVG claimed, which in some cases would be over 50 percent.

In reality, this applies at most to a few who have not even received the legal minimum wage of 12 euros an hour so far, such as the less than 2,000 DB Security employees in eastern Germany who work for absolute low wages.

Ulrich Rippert, who attended the press conference on behalf of the WSWS, asked why the executive board did not openly admit that a ten-month pay freeze had been agreed before the first stage of the increase of €410 per month came into effect. In response, negotiator Kristian Loroche ranted about inevitable compromises. He cynically remarked that he was not aware of any union ever having succeeded in getting its full demands accepted.

Despite all the arithmetic tricks of the Executive Board, the fact remains that the arbitration result means a massive reduction in real wages. Asked by a journalist about the average increase in wages, EVG negotiator Cosima Ingenschay gave a figure of 14.2 percent.

Even though it is not clear how she arrived at this, it does not even cover the wage losses from the last collective agreement. In 2021, the EVG had made enormous concessions to Deutsche Bahn during the coronavirus pandemic. With a contract term of 24 months, it agreed on a salary increase of only 1.5 percent. However, according to the Federal Statistical Office, consumer prices rose by 17.1 percent in the same period, and the price increases for food, energy and rents were much higher.

The 14.2 percent mentioned by Ingenschay does not compensate for this. And there is no additional money at all for price increases during the term of the new contract, which is for 25 months. During this period, prices are likely to rise again by considerably more than 10 percent.

An average railway worker will therefore earn at least 15 percent less in real terms in 2025 than in 2020. For some wage groups, this loss in real wages may be somewhat smaller, but it will be all the higher for others. At the press conference, the EVG leaders called this a “solidarity agreement”, but in reality, it serves to divide the workforce.

The real crux of the agreement is not only the reduction in real wages, but the rotten deal that the EVG apparently made with Deutsche Bahn management. The latter had to make certain financial concessions for some wage groups because the poor pay simply meant that no more staff could be found. In return, the EVG agreed to an increase in levels of exploitation, although working conditions are already unbearable in many areas.

For example, the EVG has agreed to longer working hours in several areas:

- The working hours of all DB bus drivers will be increased by one hour per week.

- For on-board catering, 15-hour shifts are possible up to twice a week, and with the consent of the works council even more than 15 hours and three times a week.

- For DB Netze AG, annual working time can be increased to up to 2,192 hours, which means that 42-hour weeks become permanently possible.

- Washing and changing times will be replaced by small lump sums of money, which means a disguised increase in working time and thus an additional reduction in wages.

It can be assumed that the EVG leadership has promised other things under the table and signaled that it will turn a blind eye if railway workers have to continue to work two or three times the normal hours because of staff shortages.

The new contract shows that the EVG apparatus does not represent the interests of its members, but those of the DB corporation. The DB board is backed by the government; after all DB is fully owned by the federal government. As it has already done at Deutsche Post and in the federal and municipal public services, the government is pushing to impose severe cuts in real wages.

The government is using the war in Ukraine, which is being fueled by NATO, for a massive rearmament offensive costing hundreds of billions. It is supported by all parties in the Bundestag (federal parliament) and the trade unions. At the same time, the corporations and banks are showered with more and more cash gifts, which are recouped by cutting social spending and wages.

Meanwhile, the class struggle is accelerating around the

world. In the US, 300,000 railway workers threatened to paralyse traffic last year. They were stopped by the intervention of the Biden administration, which issued a legal ban on strikes. In Britain, railway workers have been fighting for 18 months to defend their pay and conditions, only last week the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union announced the de facto end of the strike.

The struggle at Deutsche Bahn has not ended with the strike ballot, it has only just begun. In order to stop the further erosion of wages and working conditions and to fight for improvements, workers themselves must take the initiative. All experience shows that the EVG apparatus is impervious to pressure from below. The same applies to the rival rail union GDL. Structures must be built that are controlled by rank and file workers themselves, not the union bureaucrats.

The founding of the Rail Action Committee was an important step in this direction. Such action committees are being formed all over the world, including among auto workers, workers at Royal Mail and railway workers in the USA, Canada, and Germany. These committees are united under the umbrella of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The Rail Action Committee’s next task is to expose the new contract and the methods by which it was pushed through. The outcome of the ballot and the way it was achieved must be scrutinised. Workers are not bound by a contract about which they were obviously deceived.

The struggle to defend living standards, wages, jobs, and conditions can only succeed if it is organised, and politically consciously led. This is the most important lesson from the DB contract bargaining. Therefore, the Rail Action Committee must be strengthened and expanded.

Its aim is to unite all workers--EVG, GDL and non-union members--who are prepared to oppose the never-ending attacks and represent the interests of the workforce.

We call on all railway workers to contact us by Whatsapp at this number +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below.



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