

Rail Action Committee decides to continue struggle at Deutsche Bahn

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On Tuesday evening, the second national meeting of the Rail Action Committee took place. Around 70 railway workers, other transport workers as well as their supporters took part in the online meeting. At the end, a resolution was passed stating: “The struggle at Deutsche Bahn is not over with the strike ballot, it has only just begun.”

The day before, the national executive board of the EVG rail union had announced that the strike ballot resulted in a narrow majority of 52.3 percent, falling far below the 75 percent required to sanction action and effectively accepting the sell-out arbitration award. Just under two-thirds had taken part in the vote, meaning that only one in three EVG members had voted in favour of the conciliation offer. “This makes it clear that there is a lot of opposition to this deal,” stressed Dietmar Gaisenkersting, who chaired the action committee meeting. “Forty-eight percent rejected the deal, and that was despite the pressure and campaign organised by the EVG, which pulled out all the stops.”

Ulrich Rippert, a leading member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and the WSWs editorial board, opened the discussion by saying, “Despite massive pressure from the EVG and the federal executive organising hundreds of events to gloss over the arbitration result, only just over a third of those eligible to vote did so. Almost a third rejected it and another third did not participate in the vote.”

Rippert had attended the EVG press conference the previous day. As he reported, he had raised the question there: “Why doesn’t the EVG board openly say that it has agreed on a pay freeze for the first ten months?” In response, he said, he had only heard excuses from the union’s executive board, but no contradiction.

The new contract with national rail carrier Deutsche Bahn (DB) not only means a massive cut in real wages, Rippert continued: “Its real significance lies in the deal that the EVG leadership made with the DB management. Deutsche Bahn had to make financial concessions for some wage groups because there is simply no more staff to be found willing to work for miserable pay and under poor working conditions. In return, the EVG has agreed to an increase in work loads, although the working conditions for most employees in very many areas are already almost unbearable.”

In several areas, the EVG had agreed to longer working hours, for example for DB bus drivers, DB network employees and on-board catering.

“The willingness to strike was enormous, the willingness to fight was very strong,” Rippert explained. “The union did everything it could to sabotage serious industrial action.” The union was firmly integrated into the capitalist system, he said. Its officials sit on boards of directors and support the government on everything all the way to

the war economy. “A super-rich financial oligarchy at the top of society dominates all political, economic and social decisions,” Rippert pointed out. And the Ukraine war had once again massively intensified social polarisation.

Workers could not respond to this, Rippert said, by trying to renew the trade unions. “Reforming the unions, that is hopeless, that is not feasible.” He said it was necessary to organise in independent rank-and-file action committees. The next step, he said, must be to expose the new contract and the methods being used to impose it.

“We call on rail workers to report to us any irregularities in the ballot,” said Rippert. “Also, the consequences of the contract on working conditions must be documented. We will publish information about this on WSWs and mobilise workers against these deteriorations in their conditions.”

Several railway workers reported on their own experiences. More than 200 railway workers had contacted the action committee in advance. Workers who joined in directly from their shift, older workers who pointed out the decline at the railways and younger colleagues who made suggestions for further struggle spoke at the meeting.

A dispatcher at DB Netz AG confirmed the enormously high and constantly increasing number of hours he and his colleagues had to work.

A colleague from DB Cargo confirmed this. In his company, “up to four and a half hours of extra work have been added on.” He added, “We are traded and sold as a commodity (...) I can only work and work, because we now have much more work than before with fewer staff. Staff are constantly being cut (...) Yet we are the ones who drive everything. We are the driving force for DB.”

He described the latest EVG agreement as a “slap in the face” and continued, “The union only nods when DB says ‘that’s the way it is.’ And we’re in a pickle and have to figure out how we’re going to manage at the end of the month.” That’s why he signed up to the action committee, he said, “It’s nice to see a group that agrees with me!”

A bus driver who has been with the DB group for over 40 years told how his company was spun off from the public sector just over ten years ago and became part of DB Regio. He said, “Today, I earn easily €1,000 less per month than at the company where I used to work--when it was still part of the public sector. I can’t cope with that! (...) I still do the same work. Every day I drive 150 pupils around with the same bus, but I have to go home with €500 less per month. Twelve years ago, I earned almost €10,000 more a year than I do today for the same job. That is really difficult for me. With DB, you’re on the lowest rung as a bus driver.”

A pensioner who had worked as a train driver for 37 years—in total he had been with the company for over forty years—explained, “DB has reached a level that is simply no longer acceptable. It’s not just since yesterday that the pay packet is getting smaller, and the workload is increasing.” He spoke of a “spiral without end that is turning faster and faster” and said, “In the past, it was safety, punctuality, economic efficiency, in that order! Today, economic efficiency is at the top of the list, and people are walking over dead bodies.”

The former train driver went on to say, “It doesn’t matter whether you are sitting in the signal box or in the driver’s cab or behind the counter: If you have a head full of money worries, always so close to burnout—where is that supposed to lead?” That is a “risk factor”, he said. And he continued, “How can trade unions still agree to a deterioration of bad working conditions that have existed for years? How can unions side with the government and side with the corporation?” That is why, he said, he decided “to be part of this action committee. It is good that it has been formed. And now action must follow! I would like to be part of that.”

The meeting was an important step in the building of the Rail Action Committee and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Several speakers recalled that 100,000 railway workers in the US had been prepared to paralyse traffic last year. Only a strike ban by the Biden administration and the betrayal of their union had prevented them from doing so. Meanwhile, in Britain, railway workers have been fighting for better pay and conditions for 18 months.

Participants at the meeting reacted enthusiastically when Robert Stevens was brought in from Britain to report on the struggle of British railway workers. He explained how rail workers there were also facing not only the rail companies and the government, but also the union leadership. The contracts reached so far meant cuts in real wages. The British government and the privatised rail companies wanted to close almost one thousand ticket offices, he said, which meant the destruction of several thousand jobs.

“Rail workers, and indeed other transport workers, obviously have enormous power,” Stevens stressed. “They could paralyse the whole country.” However, this would require a break with the unions, he said. As Stevens explained, the leader of the Rail Maritime Transport (RMT), Mick Lynch, had only recently declared the industrial action de facto over and demanded that all strikes be suspended until the end of the year. Stevens said that the RMT and its leader Lynch were portrayed as “left-wing” in the public eye.

To applause from the audience, Stevens stressed, “It makes no difference whether these unions and their leaders are labelled left, right or moderate. They are pro-business organisations, and they will betray their members at every opportunity.” The fact is that every workers’ struggle today is political, he said. Workers were up against companies and governments that are trying to roll back all the gains in order to increase profits, cut public spending and finance the war machine, he said.

“I hear” Stevens concluded, “that railway workers in Germany, just as in England, have had very bitter experiences with the trade unions. And I hope you draw your own conclusions from the struggle of your colleagues in England and understand the need to build a new leadership for the struggle that is independent of the union.”

Towards the end of the meeting, SGP Chair Christoph Vandreier took up questions from several participants about what to do and broadened the discussion beyond the immediate problems at Deutsche

Bahn. He said, “It’s not just the EVG and it’s not just the railways.” He said that nurses, refuse workers, postal workers and teachers and many other occupational groups were also facing the same problems. They too, he said, had been ordered to stand still by the unions, most recently at Deutsche Post, even though the workers had voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action.

“The same experiences you are having on the railways are experiences workers are having everywhere.” And he stressed, “We cannot continue to allow the union bureaucracy to sit on dues, not pay strike pay and not organise strikes but prevent them. It is in fact fully collaborating with Deutsche Bahn and with the companies.”

The situation facing workers would continue to worsen, he said, because money will go to the employers and to rearmament. In order to finance all this, a radical austerity policy was being pursued at the expense of the workers. This was an international phenomenon, which Steven’s contribution in particular clearly showed.

Vandreier explained that capitalism itself was the problem, as it had nothing more to offer workers than sickness, cuts, and war. “And that means that the struggle you are now waging on the railways is part of a much bigger fight. It is about nothing less than the profit system.”

All over the world and especially in Germany, he said, socialists had historically waged this fight. “We are building on their struggle by building the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei.” A socialist perspective was necessary to “put people’s needs before profit and to wrest the economy from the clutches of the super-rich,” Vandreier said.

This led to another lively discussion. One participant raised the question of the extent to which one could address colleagues with a socialist perspective and whether one should not limit oneself to the immediate problems. Vandreier replied that the reports had just shown that railway workers are objectively confronted with very fundamental questions: was it about maximising profit or about the needs of the workers? “When workers want to defend their rights, they are confronted with a united front of trade unions, companies and all the parties in the Bundestag [federal parliament]. To this they must give their own political answer: the perspective of international socialism.”

The resolution adopted at the end of the meeting included the following two principles:

- The rights and needs of workers together with their families stand higher than the profit interests of investors, shareholders and speculators.
- We strive for international unification and cooperation. We will not be divided! For us, international cooperation and the coordination of cross-border struggles are of utmost importance.

Although it was late, the participants overwhelmingly agreed on the resolution and decided to develop the struggle on this basis. The next meeting of the action committee is planned in a fortnight.



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