

“When I go to work, it’s like going to war”

Rising number of fatal accidents on railways in Germany is the result of putting profits first

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Serious and fatal accidents are increasing at German national rail operator Deutsche Bahn (DB). The death of a young train driver on Sunday near Paderborn in North Rhine-Westphalia is already the ninth fatal accident this year, significantly more than in previous years.

The rank-and-file Rail Action Committee, which met again this week on Tuesday evening, is placing the issue of safety at the centre of its work. It calls on railway workers to gather all the information they can to shed light on the real causes of these accidents.

In the horrific train accident on Sunday afternoon, September 10, the young train driver Jonas, 32, was killed. He was travelling alone on a goods train coming from the cement works towards the Paderborn-Soest line when the braking system apparently failed. The train derailed in the middle of the town of Geseke, the locomotive turned sideways, and 12 heavily loaded wagons became wedged into each other. Jonas got caught under a tank wagon weighing several tonnes and died. He was not rescued until Monday afternoon, after the cement had been pumped out.

Broadcaster ARD’s programme *Brisant* published a video that clearly shows the locomotive was already on fire while being driven and that the train was heading downhill towards the junction with the main line without braking. The train driver was between two carriages in order to ventilate the main air line and initiate an emergency stop. Shortly before, he had telephoned to ask for a line closure.

Railway workers have vented their grief in Facebook groups. Mehmet Gül, a colleague of the man who was killed, paid tribute to him: “The locomotive caught fire during the shunting run and Jonas gave his life to bring the train to a stop! He tried to protect other lives without thinking too much: He sacrificed himself ...”

Jonas’ far too early death is not an isolated case. Only two days earlier, on Friday, September 8, a 19-year-old railway apprentice was killed in Hanover-Linden while doing control and safety (LST) work; the exact circumstances are not known. As of September 10, there have been nine fatal accidents at DB AG this year:

- **January 16, 2023:** On the line between Nuremberg and Regensburg, a locomotive hit two workers engaged in clearing work. One railway employee was killed, his colleague seriously injured.

- **February 4, 2023:** At Bebra station (Eastern Hesse), a shunting worker was hit and killed by a rolling railway wagon.

- **February 23, 2023:** A 56-year-old excavator operator was fatally injured while working at night on a railway subway in Bremerhaven.

- **May 4, 2023:** An IC (intercity train) hit two young track workers who were carrying out track tamping work in connection with cable laying in Hürth, near Cologne. Both were killed on the spot. Five other colleagues were able to jump to the side at the last moment. Deutsche Bahn initially published a tweet about “unauthorised persons on the track,” which it was forced to withdraw after protests.

- **June 14, 2023:** Near Stade, a 28-year-old railway employee was hit and killed by the Hamburg-Cuxhaven regional train. He was engaged in pruning work next to the track. His two colleagues, including his brother, managed to save themselves.

- **July 2, 2023:** At Hamm marshalling yard (NRW), a 26-year-old railway worker was caught between a rolling train and a stationary wagon and fatally injured.

This is the most murderous year on the railways for many years. In its annual report for last year, Deutsche Bahn records a total of six fatal accidents for 2020, four for 2021 and seven for 2022. And now, in 2023, with nine fatal accidents before mid-September, there has already been one per month. And this is a European-wide phenomenon: five track workers were hit and killed by a train in northern Italy on September 1.

There is also an increasing number of other accidents at Deutsche Bahn, where only luck meant they did not end fatally. Only one day after Jonas’ death, another horrific case occurred in Cologne-Kalk on Monday, September 11, when a railway employee was hit by a regional express train. The man had to be resuscitated on the spot and was taken to hospital with serious injuries.

On June 6, at a DB construction site between Hamburg-Langenhofe and Stellingen, an excavator driver hit the overhead line with the bucket of his vehicle and was seriously injured by the electric shock.

Frank S., a member of the Rail Action Committee, also suffered a similar accident 10 days ago. He was severely electrocuted on Monday, September 4, during DB-Netz work on the overhead line near Frankfurt. “I could have been dead,” said Frank, who was taken to the special clinic seriously injured and in great pain, and still faces a long ordeal.

The Rail Action Committee took Frank’s accident as the occasion to call on its members and all railway workers to gather relevant information on safety to make public, since the media quickly adopt the version presented by Deutsche Bahn, the police, professional associations and the trade unions. Even a first call to the federal police

revealed that in Frank's case the investigation was "going in the direction of human error." But the real culprits are on the DB board and the federal government, which owns the company. With their rigorous cost-cutting, they blithely accept human error and accidents.

This is always apparent when workers themselves have a say. There are numerous posts in the Facebook groups of railway workers and train drivers that concretely show the real causes of such disasters. For example, a train dispatcher in the FB group "Der Eisenbahner" describes the prevailing conditions as "cancer damage" and locates them "in the upper level, i.e., Betra office, detailed planner etc." ("Betra" are the "operational instructions" that are mandatory before each work step to determine the necessary safety measures.) He describes a night shift that two dispatchers had to manage together:

Last night we had to set up 3 Betras and lift 1 Betra (with installation of track switching equipment and its testing), at the same time points testing work. In addition, there was work from the track and from the overhead line worker. Everything was scheduled for one time, and everyone wanted to start at the same time ... Alongside this (whereby the word **ALONGSIDE** should not exist in this context) we still drove trains. It was all very questionable. But this is how the pressure on the railways is passed on.

Yet the lives of these workers literally depend on every task they have to solve in a shift! It becomes clear that the systematic reduction of staff and the constantly increasing work pressures must inevitably lead to accidents.

At the last Action Committee meeting on Tuesday, a shunting supervisor from DB Cargo spoke up and explained about the term "human error":

"It's a well-orchestrated tactic: you're short of staff, and those who are still there are so overworked or so under pressure, so stressed, so tired, that sooner or later there's automatically an accident. Then, of course, DB has won, because it is 'human error.' Yet the conditions under which we work are the problem." And he described his work at a "giant railway station that has several kilometres of tracks."

Most recently, he said, they were conducting work with four colleagues, which actually requires 12 employees. "You just shake your head and say, how can this work?" His conclusion:

Every time I go to work, it's like I'm going to war. And I worry about my family, because if something should happen to me—who will take care of my children and my wife? The union works for the company; and the government, it's actually the head of the snake. But we need the security that nothing will happen to us at work. And if something should happen to me—that I won't be blamed.

At the meeting, several members of the Action Committee reported that at large marshalling yards the necessary power cuts sometimes do not take place due to time pressure, but workers still climb up [the gantry] and risk their lives. The remarks made clear how urgent it is now to build independent action committees in all workplaces. Only by putting safety first can the fatal and serious accidents be stopped.

At the end of the Action Committee meeting, after discussion on a number of other important issues, Ulrich Rippert, a leading member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), spoke again on the issue of workplace accidents and safety. He said:

We need more control over work procedures and processes. People often have the idea that the unions do that, but that is completely wrong. In reality, it is the other way round: These accidents can only take place because the union agrees to the constant, systematic deterioration of working conditions and at the same time enforces cuts in real wages, so that many are no longer willing to do such dangerous, strenuous and underpaid work under these conditions. As a result, there is a shortage of workers, the workload increases, and the risk of occupational accidents constantly increases.

These occupational accidents can only be prevented in the future, he continued, "if we take action ourselves. And that means we have to organise ourselves independently. We have to break the control and straitjacket of the trade union apparatus and take control ourselves. Workers' health must take priority over profits." He said the formation of the Rail Action Committee was the first, important step towards this end.

Register with the Rail Action Committee to share information about your working conditions at the railways, and to join us in building independent action committees. Register using the form below and contact us via the WhatsApp number +49-163-337 8340.



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