

Unbearable working conditions at Germany's Deutsche Bahn Cargo—a switchyard worker's reports

Marianne Arens
17 October 2023

We are publishing reports from railroad workers about the devastating working conditions at the German railroad company, which take worker's deaths in stride for the sake of profits. Contact us via Whatsapp at +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below this article to report your own experiences.

Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German state railroad company, wants to cut a further 1,800 jobs at its subsidiary DB Cargo to get out of the red. What this means in practice is already evident to railroad workers. Staff shortages and exploitation have reached drastic proportions. Work accidents or near-accidents are occurring more and more frequently and considering the dangers of this hard work, wages are woefully inadequate.

One worker who experiences these conditions firsthand is M.M., a member of the Rail Rank-and-File Committee (Aktionskomitee Bahn). He is a foreman and switch yard supervisor at one of the largest European marshalling yards, where he is in the process of setting up an independent rank-and-file committee together with colleagues.

M.M. told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Downsizing has long started at our company; it is already in full swing.” He reports that at night at the switch yard, where normally at least eight people should be on duty, there are currently sometimes only two colleagues left working: “Just recently it happened again: There I was all alone, and another colleague was doing work in another group. If someone had asked me afterwards how I was feeling physically, I could only have said: I feel like a 90-year-old man with all my bones broken.”

M.M.'s worksite is the so-called gravity marshalling yard (Ablaufberg), where workers have the job titles shunting engineer (Bergzuglokf hrer) or hump operator (Bergmeister). The yard is composed of an elevated bit of terrain with a track where the wagons are separated from each other. Then the locomotive pushes them over the hump, where gravity causes them to roll downhill to connect to new

trains.

“Our job as shunting engineers is to separate the incoming trains,” explained M.M. “This involves using a shunting rod to push the railcars apart while the train is moving. Then the push-off locomotive pushes the cars over the hill, they are ‘pushed off,’ that is, they roll downhill, into the correct car order. Before that, the signalman sets the switches according to his program.”

A team dismantling trains at this yard not long ago consisted of three men. Just a few months back one of the positions was eliminated. The reason given was that DB Cargo currently had fewer customers and therefore fewer trains. “However, the trains have definitely been longer since then,” said M.M. “And in the meantime it has become the rule that we work as only two-man teams.”

In addition, explained M.M., the work is entirely exhausting. “More and more often, colleagues drop out due to illness, so one man has to do all the work alone.” He described what it consists of: “Often we have to deal with 600 or 700 m long trains, which we have to walk down twice: first when we dismantle them and then, when we go back, to check them. That's up to 1.4 km per train. With ten or even more trains per shift, that results in a walk of up to 15 km per shift: a walk over gravel with constant bending, plus the shunting rod, which weighs 25 kg by itself.”

“Do that for two weeks,” he added, “and you'll be sick for two weeks afterwards. I did it in the summer on the afternoon shift in the worst of the heat. It was hard to keep it up. On top of that, the dispatchers have [been] constantly pressuring us lately. Even though we have fewer colleagues, we're supposed to maintain productivity and even increase it.”

This work is anything but safe. “I've already looked death in the eye myself,” M.M. noted, “and only quick reactions saved me from being pulled under a rail car. My wife says goodbye to me every day like it could be the last.”

The topic of occupational safety and accidents has been

the focus of the Rail Rank-and-File Committee for several weeks, ever since a member of the committee had a serious work accident at DB Network Overhead Line Maintenance (Netz Instandhaltung Oberleitung). In fact there have already been ten fatal work accidents at Deutsche Bahn this year alone. Both the railroad board and the railroad workers' union EVG are doing everything they can to cover up the deadly dangers.

At the marshalling yard where M.M. works, the staff shortage is also resulting in increasingly dangerous situations. "You get the impression they're taking death in stride," said M.M. "The newspapers only carry the stories the government and business want, and nobody talks about how we're doing and how dangerous our work is. After all, we have to work at night when everyone is overtired and there is not enough light. Accidents are bound to happen."

He reported a recent dangerous situation in the marshalling yard when the bushes along the tracks had not been cut back. "The bushes grew up to two meters high. We couldn't get through everywhere and got caught in it with the shunting rod. It was a real operational hazard. Eventually it got so bad that we all refused to go unhook the trains anymore because it was just too dangerous."

M.M. also addressed the meager pay for this strenuous, dangerous work. "If I had at least a big chunk of money at the end of the month doing this, then maybe the whole thing would be halfway bearable. But that is not the case! We workers don't want to become millionaires at all," he added. "I want to live normally, to be able to buy my children shoes and warm winter clothes when needed, and always have enough money so that we can eat and live reasonably. But that's not a given based on my wage alone."

His basic wage is 2,100 euro per month after taxes. "I can't support a family with two children on that. I count on the premiums for night shifts. That's why I can never take a four-week vacation, because then I don't have the night shift bonuses. Without them, however, I wouldn't be able to pay rent, fixed costs and all the rest. It already happens all the time that I have to fall back on reserves that I saved up at my previous job. The salary is simply too little for the dangerous work. A dog gets more empathy than we get at DB Cargo."

These conditions are the reason why the railroad workers were so dissatisfied with the outcome of the latest round of collective bargaining and are furious with the EVG. The EVG stifled the collective bargaining struggle and forced massive real wage cuts and further attacks on its members. EVG prevented the strike despite overwhelming willingness among workers to fight. The subsequent announcements of job cuts show even more clearly that the EVG leadership is playing for the other team, on the side of the railroads and the government, not the workers.

The EVG knew early on about the plan to cut thousands of jobs at DB Cargo. It was reported in early summer. It was in an internal "white paper for freight transport," according to the press, which DB Cargo boss Sigrud Nikutta wanted to present to the supervisory board before the end of October. She has developed these plans in cooperation with the management consultancy Roland Berger, which, according to Business Insider, is collecting around 8 million euro for the work.

M.M. voted 'No' in the balloting, along with many of his colleagues, casting their votes against the conciliation offer and in favor of a strike. "EVG is obviously just a service provider, a kind of subcontractor for DB," he said at the time. Because of EVG's cooperation, DB Cargo can mercilessly implement job cuts.

At the meeting of the Rail Rank-and-File Committee last Tuesday, which included postal workers, the issue of job cuts came up. A postman from Frankfurt Airport noted how similar the attacks on workers were in both areas. He said: "There is always money for war and for military aid for Ukraine. But that infrastructure in Germany is crumbling is the other side of the coin."

The Rank-and-File Committee aims to unite workers independently of the EVG and the GLD train drivers' unions. It established two principles at its founding. First, the interests and needs of workers take precedence over the profits of corporations; and second, the allies of railroad workers are not to be found in boardrooms and union offices, rather they are the other railroad workers and laborers of Europe and around the world.

"What this committee has set out to do is exactly what I have been trying to do for a long time as a lone wolf," said M.M. His report shows that great potential exists for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in workplaces. "When we refused to continue working because the bushes were so overgrown, it was because everybody stuck together. For once in our lives, everyone stuck together," M.M. reports, "And these conditions exist in pretty much every part of DB."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact