

20-hour warning strike shows train drivers' determination

Marianne Arens
17 November 2023

The strike by train drivers in the GDL union has once again shown the power that rail workers and the working class as a whole can wield. It makes clear what a united struggle by all railway workers could achieve.

Members of the GDL train drivers' union paralysed rail operations this week with a 20-hour nationwide warning strike. From 10 p.m. on Wednesday night until 6 p.m. on Thursday evening, long-distance and regional services were massively affected, as were suburban rail services in all major cities.

In the Munich area, most S-Bahn local trains only ran every 60 minutes, and in the eastern German states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, where the GDL is particularly strongly represented, there was largely a standstill. Around 20 percent of trains were still running on long-distance services throughout Germany.

The GDL has demanded a wage increase of €555 per month for a one-year term and an inflation compensation bonus of €3,000, as well as a gradual reduction in working hours for shift work to 35 hours, with full wage compensation. A first round of negotiations was broken off after five hours last week. The railway management apparently refused to even discuss the reduction in working hours and instead presented a list of attacks on rail workers' previous achievements. For example, a holiday regulation from the last collective agreement is to be abolished.

In public, railway personnel director Martin Seiler presented the offer of an 11 percent wage increase over a period of 32 months, corresponding to an "increase" of around 4 percent over the year, which in view of inflation, means a massive reduction in real wages. Seiler described the warning strike as an "exceptional escalation in our social partnership," and responded to the strike announcement by cancelling the second round of negotiations, which should have started on Thursday.

Several media outlets are spitting venom and bile

against the strike. "GDL boss Weselsky rejects the Christmas truce," headlined the *Tagesspiegel*. The *Bild* tabloid called the strike "Just outrageous!" and wrote of Weselsky: "This man won't come to an agreement." Many journalists mentioned Deutsche Bahn's offer of 11 percent without pointing out that it was for 32 months. *Bild* wrote: "Millions of Germans can only dream of such an offer."

In contrast, many rail travellers expressed understanding for the strike, such as Julia S., who defended the strikers to the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeige*, saying, "It's important and right that the train drivers are sending a signal for better working conditions and more pay. They are also suffering from the whole system." Christina wrote online, "Their demands may not all be understandable to me as a non-railway worker, but the job is definitely tough and the conditions are lousy, so they should strike to make things better."

Numerous train drivers and railway workers, whether GDL members or not, commented on the "Helden der Schiene" ("Hero of the tracks") Facebook page. Steffen wrote, "11 percent spread over 3 years: That's a great score. Three times nothing still leaves nothing." Manuel commented on Deutsche Bahn's offer: "11 percent over 3 years, i.e., 4 percent per year. And all other demands were rejected. Where is there a basis for negotiation? ... I'm not a train driver and I'm not in favour of the GDL, but this offer is so brazen that I'm lost for words."

Train driver Peter wrote, "What my colleagues and I are going through at the moment is tough, and the bosses up there are getting bonuses and pay rises. But we little ones down here keep the place running." Manfred commented that Deutsche Bahn "is lining its pockets at management level and the workers are being left behind."

Others reported that, as train drivers, they actually had neither a 38-hour nor a 39-hour week, but a 50-hour week. Frank, for example, wrote, "We get up at 1 a.m.

and also work at weekends and on Christmas and New Year's Day. For decades, staff have been cut again and again. Not to mention the fact that we have almost no shift lasting under 10 hours, and early and late shifts on alternate days." He said, "This will certainly be one of the toughest labour disputes in years. But it is necessary."

At Frankfurt Central Station, engine driver Engin, who works for the Rhein-Main suburban railway company, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* what was at stake: "We need more pay simply because of inflation. I'm the sole earner, I have a family at home and I'm really struggling at the moment." Engin said that his basic salary at the railway was €3,000 gross, "11 percent of 3,000, and that's for almost three years, and it's only paid piecemeal—that's simply not enough".

He continued: "What is often not recognised: As train drivers, we bear great responsibility, we don't just drive the trains back and forth. We are responsible for everything and have to answer for anything that breaks on the railway. Before setting off, I have to prepare my train, everything is checked, from the brakes to every other safety-related thing."

He then reported that he was always alone in the train on S-Bahn services in the Rhine-Main region: "We are the train manager and driver at the same time. And these are often long and full trains where there can be a lot of problems. Theoretically, we would have a replacement in an emergency, there is a standby service for this, but this is far from being available everywhere. It's often missing just when you need it."

Finally, Engin remarked that he could not understand why the German government, which still owns the entire track network and a large part of the rolling stock, was investing hundreds of billions of euros in war preparations, "but there is no money for the railway. That begs the question: does it have to be such a large sum for defence?"

"I'm generally against war," added Engin. "If it were up to me, no money would have to be spent on defence at all. Germany is not under threat. If the government wasn't always interfering somewhere, we wouldn't need all this. When people die in war, something is fundamentally wrong."

The warning strike has once again shown the power of railway workers and the working class as a whole. It makes it clear what could be achieved if train drivers, guards and other railway workers, who number well over 200,000, conducted a joint struggle in Germany, and at the same time fought together with their colleagues in

other European countries. On Friday, a nationwide transport workers' strike took place in Italy, which was also directed against the pro-war policy and genocide in Gaza.

The GDL leadership around Claus Weselsky is miles away from this. "We are not engaged in class warfare," Weselsky said a few months ago when he introduced the GDL's own labour hire company Fair Train. For the GDL leadership, the warning strike was above all a reaction to the great dissatisfaction and willingness to fight that is simmering at grassroots level.

At the same time, there was no attempt by the union leadership to appeal to other sections of the railway workforce, let alone the wider working class, and to extend the struggle. On the contrary: enquiries from the WSWS as to where the pickets were to be found in the respective cities were left unanswered by the GDL, and in Berlin they even tried to isolate the train drivers and prevent WSWS reporters from talking to the strikers.

In order for the struggles of the working class to succeed, the WSWS has taken the initiative to build the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We call on workers to unite in these rank-and-file action committees independently of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions. In Germany, the Rail Action Committee was founded during the rail strike by EVG union members to express distrust of the union, to take the strike into their own hands and to unite railway workers, regardless of whether they are members of a union or not.

If you would like to join the Rail Action Committee, please contact us by WhatsApp on +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact