

The divisive role of the GDL rail union leadership

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8 December 2023

The GDL train drivers' union called out its members on a 24-hour warning strike at state-owned Deutsche Bahn and some private railway operators on Friday. At the same time, GDL leader Claus Weselsky has announced that there will be no further strikes until next year.

“We will now carry out this strike action on Thursday and Friday, and it will be the last one for this year,” Weselsky told broadcaster MDR-aktuell. “This will be followed by a ballot and the count on 19 December. And there will be no more industrial action, not even in the first week of January.”

Weselsky could not make it any clearer that the strike is purely symbolic. It means some inconvenience for railway management, which had to draw up an emergency timetable and then get operations up and running again. But after that, the GDL assures them of peace and quiet for a full month. But a real industrial struggle looks different. Even the onset of winter last weekend, which brought the ailing railway to a complete standstill in many parts of the country, had more serious consequences.

The GDL is only considering new industrial action for the period after January 7, which would be “longer and tougher,” as Weselsky pompously put it. But such words are familiar. Both Weselsky and Deutsche Bahn hope that by then, the wage dispute for the 2.5 million public sector employees in the federal states will be concluded and it would then be easier to isolate the train drivers.

There will also be enough time until January 7 to agree a rotten deal behind the scenes or call in a mediator, as was the case in 2021 when the GDL sold out the contract bargaining battle in time for the federal election despite rail workers' great willingness to strike

Weselsky's ploy of posing as a radical trade unionist, insulting the railway management and calling for warning strikes at short notice has now worn thin. It primarily served to poach members from the tame in-house rail union EVG. However, the wage agreements reached by the GDL are no better than those of the EVG.

The GDL has entered the current bargaining round with a demand that does not even compensate for the loss in real wages of recent years. It is demanding a wage increase of €555 per month and an inflation compensation bonus of €3,000 over a period of twelve months. But even before the start of negotiations Weselsky has stated: “We have never reached an agreement that fulfils one hundred percent of our demands.”

Deutsche Bahn, whose boss Richard Lutz increased his salary by 145 percent to €2.24 million last year, countered with a provocative offer of 11 percent for a term of 32 months, corresponding to an annual increase of just 3.7 percent. Food prices alone have risen by 28 percent in the past two years!

As the GDL has long since given up the fight for rail workers to receive full compensation for inflation, it is now focussing on the demand for a reduction in working hours for shift workers from 38 to 35 hours with no loss of income. This demand is more than justified but is strictly rejected by the management, which justifies its refusal to even negotiate on this citing the high costs and the lack of trained train drivers.

The GDL will not ignore this reasoning, even if Weselsky is now declaring that the urgently needed new staff can only be recruited by improving working conditions.

The reason for this is that Weselsky's GDL and the

conservative civil servants' federation dbb, of which it is part, pursue a policy of "social partnership," just like the EVG and the German Trade Union Confederation DGB. Weselsky has repeatedly emphasised that he is "not engaged in class warfare, but in the market economy." He is even a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), whose leader Friedrich Merz vehemently defends the debt ceiling and who brought a successful action before the Supreme Court to overturn the government's climate fund, from which billions were supposed to flow into the renovation of railway infrastructure.

The policy of "social partnership" has turned all trade unions into an auxiliary police force for the corporations and government. In the name of "competitiveness" and "defending Germany as an industrial location," they are lowering wages, intensifying levels of labour exploitation and cutting jobs. The consequences of this policy can be felt particularly clearly in the railway sector. An infrastructure ruined by cuts, staff shortages, poor wages and the accumulation of fatal accidents make working conditions unbearable.

The German government, which owns Deutsche Bahn, is now stepping up its attacks on the working class. In the coming year, it is investing €89 billion in armaments, supplying weapons and ammunition worth €8 billion to Ukraine so that Ukrainian and Russian soldiers can continue slaughtering each other, and cold-bloodedly supporting the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. It is reducing wages and social benefits in Germany with the same brutality.

This is the enemy that the railway workforce is up against. It cannot be defeated by symbolic strikes and radical phrases, but only by a broad offensive that unites all sections of the working class and is guided by a socialist perspective that places social needs above the profit interests of shareholders and the wealthy.

Like all trade unions, the GDL categorically rejects this. Weselsky emphasises that every company, including Deutsche Bahn, must operate economically. He has even founded a union-owned temporary employment agency called Fair Train eG, which is supposed to hire train drivers to the railway companies.

What he sells as a clever ploy to wrest higher wages for one occupational group in the face of staff shortages actually amounts to dividing the workforce and, as we

have written, "a kind of Ryan Air-isation of the railways." The low-cost airline Ryan Air has perfected the system of outsourcing and contract labour and employs pilots and crews on the lowest wages.

The fight for better wages, working conditions and jobs requires a break with the trade unions, both the GDL and the EVG, and the establishment of independent rank-and-file action committees that are controlled by the members and which are networked nationwide and internationally. We call on all railway workers to contact the Rail Action Committee.

Get in touch via Whatsapp on +49-163-337 8340 and register for our meetings using the form below and if you would like to join the action committee.



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