

Second warning strike by train drivers in Germany: “We’re at work for 10 or 11 hours”

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The second nationwide warning strike by train drivers belonging to the GDL union brought long distance, regional and suburban rail services in Germany to an almost complete standstill on Friday. The 24-hour strike began on Thursday evening at 6 p.m. for freight transport and at 10 p.m. for passenger transport. Train drivers and other railway workers from the GDL (German Train Drivers’ Union) went on strike throughout the Deutsche Bahn network and at some private railway companies, such as Transdev, in support of their more than justified demands for a pay rise and a reduction in working hours.

The Deutsche Bahn management spat venom and bile. Head of Human Resources Martin Seiler, himself a former postal and Verdi trade unionist, called the strike “irresponsible and selfish.” The *Augsburger Allgemeine* quoted Seiler as saying that the GDL “is spoiling the second Advent weekend for millions of uninvolved people. ... Instead of negotiating and facing up to reality, the train drivers’ union is going on strike for unrealisable demands. This is absolutely unnecessary.”

Some media outlets sided completely with the railway management, such as the notoriously anti-working-class *BILD* newspaper. “The behaviour of the GDL is reckless, destructive and simply unacceptable,” wrote *BILD*, which did not shy away from lies and misrepresentations. It claimed: “Deutsche Bahn is offering 11 percent more pay. That is not enough for the GDL. It wants to reduce the working week to 35 hours, with no loss of pay, and enforce the four-day week in shift work.” The railway strike was “above all about power.”

BILD knowingly conceals the fact that the “11 percent wage increase” is supposed to last for more than two-and-a-half years. Deutsche Bahn has offered the train drivers 11 percent for a contract term of 32 months (!), which corresponds to an annual increase of 3.7 percent. This is despite the fact that food prices in Germany have risen by 28 percent in the past two years and household energy prices by

over 50 percent. Deutsche Bahn CEO Richard Lutz, who wants to dictate such massive wage cuts to train drivers, was able to increase his own salary last year by 145 percent to €2.24 million, which is around 50 times the salary of a train driver.

In reality, the GDL has put forward a very modest demand of a monthly wage increase of €555 (plus €3,000 inflation compensation) over a 12-month period, which does not even compensate for the losses in real wages of recent years. In addition, the union is demanding a reduction in weekly working hours from the current 38 to 35 hours for shift workers, as well as an increase in shift allowances and company pension schemes.

The demand for a reduction in weekly working hours is probably the demand that enjoys the greatest support among train drivers. Many of them are fully behind the industrial action because they expect it to reduce their relentless workload.

Contrary to what the railway management and *BILD* claim, this is not about a four-day week, but about a guarantee that train drivers will get two full days off after a maximum of working five consecutive shift days. “If I have a night shift, then the associated day is part of it,” one train driver told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Friday. “If four night shifts have to be worked, then five days are also lost.”

A 51-year-old train driver told broadcaster NDR: “It often happens that you only have one day off after five or six shifts. That’s definitely not enough. You inevitably need that one day to regenerate, but then you still have time off to spend with family and friends.” The same train driver explained his work schedule using an example week: sometimes he has to start at 2:50 a.m., then at 3:41 a.m. and then again at 5:07 a.m. “The shifts are no longer planned by people, but by the computer”—which, however, was mainly programmed for efficiency, not for human needs.

Many train drivers regret not having more time for their children. Many who have been doing this work for years

suffer from sleep disorders, exhaustion, tinnitus or other symptoms. But they are solely responsible for the train they drive for many hours every day.

Christian, a GDL locomotive driver from Darmstadt, also spoke to the WSWs about this in front of Frankfurt Central Station on Friday.

“For me personally, the 35-hour rule is the most important thing. I have a small child. I want to see my child grow up, and that doesn’t happen if I’m at work six times a week for 12 hours.” If the demand goes through, he would have two days off in a row every week: “I could organise my free time—which is very difficult now. When I’m working, all my friends are off, and when they’re doing something, I’m on shift.”

Commenting on his working conditions, Christian said, “The shifts here in the region are incredibly long. We’re not talking about regular working hours of eight hours, like someone in an office might have, from seven to three o’clock, for example. We are at work for 10 or 11 hours. If you come from another depot, the journey to your place of work is added on, so you can easily have shifts of 12 hours.”

He added, “As train drivers, we are basically alone with the whole train. Apart from us, there’s also a train attendant, but he’s traveling on the train.”

Christian also considers the increase in the company pension scheme to be important. He added, “The railway management could have prepared for the current situation 10 years ago. We are talking about so-called public services, which is what the railway should be.” Instead, such fairy tales were spread that train drivers were demanding a four-day week.

Contrary to what the bourgeois media claim, the train drivers are experiencing support rather than criticism from travellers. While the strikers were gathering outside Frankfurt Central Station, a passenger approached them and said, “I just didn’t get my train because of your strike, but I still wanted to tell you: keep up the good work! I’m on your side.”

The train drivers enjoy broad support among working people, but they are facing an acute problem: They are not only confronted with the Deutsche Bahn management in the fight for their justified demands. The GDL union will also ultimately agree a deal that does not call into question the so-called “economic efficiency” of the railways under capitalism.

The GDL is neither willing nor able to take a principled fight to the end. As GDL leader Claus Weselsky explicitly stated, he is “not engaged in class struggle, but in the market economy.” Weselsky is even a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which has just seen to it that the climate fund—supposed to provide billions of euros

for the renovation of railway infrastructure—was ruled unconstitutional following its case at the Supreme Court.

All the establishment parties—from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the CDU to the ruling coalition of the Social Democrats, Liberal Democrats and Greens, to the Left Party—are currently supporting a brutal pro-war policy. They are investing no less than €89 billion in armaments and supplying €8 billion worth of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine so that Ukrainian and Russian soldiers can continue to slaughter each other. They also cold-bloodedly support the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza.

It is the government, the owner of Deutsche Bahn, which is the enemy that train drivers and all railway workers confront. It would be blindness to expect it to recognise the need for decent wages and working conditions.

This opponent “cannot be defeated by symbolic strikes and radical phrases,” as the WSWs wrote, “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.” However, the GDL, like all trade unions, is miles away from this.

“We will crack them!” Claus Weselsky proclaimed loudly this Friday in Potsdam. He was the main speaker at a rally organised by the German civil servants’ association dbb, of which the GDL is part.

However, the GDL has just officially postponed the fight for a month until next year. It rejects the necessary joint mobilisation of all railway workers as well as combined industrial action by all workers in the public and private sectors—against wage theft, social cuts, war and oppression.

For this reason, the rank-and-file Rail Action Committee, which was formed after the sell-out contract agreed by the main EVG rail union in the summer, is appealing to GDL members: “Place no trust in the union leadership! Join the Rail Action Committee!”

The fight for better wages, working conditions and jobs requires a break with the trade union bureaucracy and the establishment of independent action committees that are controlled by the members themselves and which network nationwide and internationally.

We call on all railway workers to get in touch with the Rail Action Committee and join it! Contact us via WhatsApp on +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below to join the action committee.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact