

Train drivers in Germany strike for better wages and shorter working hours

Marianne Arens
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The nationwide strike by the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) against state-owned Deutsche Bahn (DB) began on Wednesday night. In the fight for better wages and a reduction in working hours from 38 to 35 hours per week, train drivers, attendants, dispatchers and other railway workers will continue the strike until Friday evening.

The management had tried unsuccessfully to have the strike banned by the courts. The private rail and bus company Transdev, where workers are also on strike, joined the court action. However, DB and Transdev's application for a temporary injunction against the strike was rejected by the Hesse State Labour Court (LAG) late Tuesday afternoon. A freight transport strike began at virtually the same time, 6 p.m. The train drivers operating passenger transport took up industrial action at 2 a.m. on Wednesday morning.

The dissatisfaction among railway workers is palpable. After two 24-hour warning strikes in November and December, the GDL's ballot shortly before the holidays resulted in a 97 percent vote in favour of an indefinite strike. "We are not just striking for pay rises, but for better working conditions and planning security," said one train driver, summarising the workers' mood.

The demand for a reduction in working hours is particularly popular. Nothing has improved in this respect since the last strike three years ago—quite the opposite. Drivers are still working highly irregular shifts day and night without being adequately rewarded by DB.

A young driver from northern Germany operating InterCity Express (ICS) trains told newsweekly *Die Zeit*: "I work up to six days a week. One shift lasts up to 12 hours. Sometimes we only have half a day's break and then it's straight back to work. Shifts can sometimes start at three in the morning. There are often changes at short notice because there is not enough staff. That's mentally very stressful." He continued, "It still happens that you have an early shift on Mondays, a late shift on Tuesdays and a night shift on Wednesdays. That completely disrupts your biorhythm." He earns between €2,350 and a maximum of €2,600 net per month, he continued. Yet train drivers like him are responsible for driving ICE trains safely across the whole of Germany, with trains carrying up to 1,000 passengers. "We simply deserve more!" he said emphatically.

The offer from the DB board, on the other hand, is a provocation: Martin Seiler, head of human resources, rejects a 35-hour week with full pay compensation outright. On January 5, he again appeared before the press and declared that Deutsche Bahn would in future allow train drivers to freely choose whether to reduce their working hours to 35 hours. This is to deliberately mislead the public, because the new "offer" means that for every work hour less, 2.6 percent will be deducted from the employees' wages—so workers are supposed to finance the reduction in working hours themselves!

When GDL members heard about this, many described it as a joke: "If the GDL had accepted this, then something would have happened!" a union member in the Ruhr area told the WSWS.

With his provocative offer, the personnel director, who authorises millions in salaries and bonuses for himself, has actually increased the anger and willingness to strike. At the same time, Deutsche Bahn is still only offering an 11 percent pay "increase"—to run for 32 months, which amounts to no more than 3.7 percent per year. In view of the horrendous inflation, this is a massive reduction in real wages.

Behind the DB management stands the German government as the owner of Deutsche Bahn. And the government has apparently prescribed a fixed budget for the DB for this round of collective bargaining, which must not be exceeded. This means that train drivers and railway workers are not only confronted with the DB management, but also with the federal coalition government of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP), which wants to push through massive social cuts to finance its exorbitant military spending.

The same brutality with which the German government supports the genocide in Gaza is also expressed in its actions against railway workers and the working class as a whole. It is endlessly supplying weapons and ammunition to Israel and Ukraine and financing a gigantic rearmament of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces). When the train drivers' strike began, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Economics Minister Robert Habeck (both Greens) once again travelled to the Middle East to fuel the war, the costs of which will be borne by the working class, including railway workers. This is why the German government is encouraging the officials and

managers on the DB board to trample on the vital interests and justified demands of train drivers and railway workers.

Striking rail workers confront both these opponents. To defeat them, a change of course in the industrial action is necessary. GDL leader Weselsky uses every opportunity to emphasise that he will prevent an unlimited all-out strike at all costs. Why? He wants to prevent a confrontation with the government and is preparing a rotten compromise and sell-out. It is therefore necessary to break the dictatorship of the GDL leadership and make the current strike the prelude to a broad mobilisation of all railway workers and, beyond that, all transport workers.

“Take the strike into your own hands!” says an appeal addressed to GDL members by the rank-and-file Rail Action Committee, which includes both union members and non-members. The action committee advocates combining the fight for wages and living conditions with resistance against war and the genocide in Gaza. The strikes must be extended, and conditions must be created to stop arms shipments to Israel and Ukraine and to halt the government’s pro-war course, which is also behind the attacks on train drivers and other railway workers.

“We fully support your strike,” writes the Rail Action Committee, addressed to the GDL members. “But the GDL and its chairman Claus Weselsky are not even thinking of organising such an all-out strike.” The GDL leadership is doing everything it can to isolate the strike and keep it small; all railway workers are under the same pressure. In the summer, several tens of thousands demonstrated their willingness to fight during the EVG warning strikes, until they were shamefully sold out by the EVG leadership once again.

Above all, the GDL is not prepared to reach out to the wider working class. In December, when 2.5 million public sector workers in the federal states were simultaneously engaged in wage disputes, Weselsky cancelled rail workers’ industrial action for a full month. That was no coincidence.

Weselsky assured the industry that the GDL would “strike for three to a maximum of five days” because anything else would be “out of order in view of the economic consequences.” Yet 97 percent of his members had voted in favour of an indefinite strike in the ballot! Weselsky, a Christian Democrat, has previously assured the bosses and the government: “We are not engaged in class warfare, but in a market economy.”

If the strike is left to the GDL, it will inevitably end in a sell-out. On Sunday, Weselsky made clear what he is aiming for: He would be prepared to agree a deal like the recent ones at Go-Ahead and Netinera, where the 35-hour week is to be introduced gradually, starting in 2025 and continuing until 2028. In addition, there would only be a wage increase totalling €420, spread over two years, as well as inflation compensation of €3,000 paid in three instalments over a period of 24 months.

The GDL’s wage demand is completely inadequate. Officially, the union is calling for an increase of €555 per

month as part of a one-year contract. Even if this demand were fully realised, the losses of recent years would still not be offset. But as it now appears, Weselsky has already waived this original demand.

It is therefore clear from the outset that the result of the GDL’s tactics will once again not significantly improve the current situation of train drivers and railway workers. As in its previous contract bargaining rounds, the GDL will agree to a compromise that postpones the reduction in working hours—if it comes at all—to the distant future. At the same time, Weselsky will accept a wage result that is far from compensating for the increase in the costs of basic goods such as food, heating, rents and petrol, let alone making up for the losses of recent years. The stress of rotating shifts will not change under the GDL leadership, and the risk of accidents will continue to rise.

Weselsky is far more concerned about another project rather than the success of the train drivers’ strike: the “Fair Train e.V.” temporary employment agency, which the union founded a year ago, but which is exacerbating the growing division among railway workers.

In Berlin, a former tram maintenance worker referred to this in an interview with the WSWS. He was very sceptical about the “Fair Train” project, which he said would further deepen the wage divide within local and long-distance public transport. The different rates under which railway workers, train drivers and bus drivers have to work were already “the disastrous result of the division of all railway and transport workers.”

In order to overcome this division, it is necessary to build up the independent action committees. They are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and unite workers in Germany with striking colleagues in Britain, France, the US and all over the world. This is the only way to lead to success the growing resistance of the international working class against inflation and wage cuts, mass redundancies and plant closures, increasing workloads and the threat of war.

The Rail Action Committee calls on striking GDL locomotive drivers and all railway workers: Register using the form below, sign up on WhatsApp at +49-163-337 8340 and join our next online meeting on Tuesday, 16 January, 7 p.m.



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