

Support the train drivers' strike in Germany!

Dietmar Gaisenkersting**24 January 2024**

The six-day strike at Deutsche Bahn (DB) started by the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) must be supported by all workers. While DB, which is backed by the government, wants to make an example of one of the most militant sections of the working class, the rail workers are not prepared to accept the planned attacks. They are going on the offensive and defending themselves against cuts in real wages, a jobs' massacre, worsening working conditions and social cuts that affect all workers.

It is therefore important to actively support and extend the train drivers' strike. It must be made the starting point for a broad mobilisation of the entire working class. In a situation in which a mass movement against the shift to the right by all the establishment parties, social cuts and war is developing in Germany and worldwide, and resistance is growing among workers in all sectors, there is a strong basis for this.

Collective bargaining for the approximately 15,600 employees of the public transit operator BVG (Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe) began on Wednesday, the same day as the GDL strike. Although the contractual no-strike obligation at the transport companies expired at the beginning of the year, the Verdi union has so far refused to take any initiative for joint industrial action by public transport workers with the train drivers. The GDL leadership and the entire trade union bureaucracy are playing the same role.

This can no longer be accepted. It is necessary to mobilise all transport workers in support of the train drivers and to organise a joint struggle to break the resistance of the DB management and the federal government.

The third offer made by DB last Friday was a provocation.

Deutsche Bahn had offered to pay €2,850 to compensate for inflation and to increase wages in two stages, by 4.8 percent on August 1, 2024, and by 5 percent on April 1, 2025, with a contract running for 32 months (from November 1, 2023, to June 30, 2026). Weekly working time is to be reduced by one hour to 37 hours on January 1, 2026, for all those who wish to do so, with the same pay. Those who do not reduce their working hours will receive a further 2.7 percent.

The GDL has stated that Head of Human Resources

Martin Seiler has linked the offered reduction in working hours to the condition that Deutsche Bahn is able to hire enough additional employees. In fact, this would mean leaving the reduction in working hours to the caprice of DB, as it is Seiler who decides whether employees are hired and whether this is considered "sufficient."

After several rounds of negotiations, two warning strikes last year and the three-day strike at the beginning of January, DB is not even offering the train drivers the miserable deal it agreed to with its in-house union EVG last year. Nevertheless, HR Director Martin Seiler claims that the latest offer means there was "absolutely no reason to refuse to enter into talks."

Seiler, a former works council representative and trade union official, is supported by the German government. Transport Minister Volker Wissing (Liberal Democrats, FDP) strongly criticised the GDL's strike announcement: "I have zero understanding for this form of collective bargaining," he said on broadcasters ARD and ZDF. The wage dispute between Deutsche Bahn and GDL was taking on "increasingly destructive traits," he said.

The media have inflated the DB wage offer to "around 13 percent" in line with DB and government propaganda. But anyone who can do the math knows that it is only 9.8 percent or—if the reduction in working hours is waived—12.5 percent over the course of 32 months.

The purpose of this whitewash is to denounce the train drivers as a money-grabbing, privileged professional group that is holding millions of rail customers and the entire economy hostage through its powerful position. However, while the directors and managers are pocketing bonuses worth millions, this supposedly "generous" offer by DB amounts to a reduction in the real wages of train drivers after an inflation rate of 5.9 percent in 2023.

Drivers have already had to accept cuts in real wages over the last 10 years, from 2014 to 2023. The wages of GDL workers at Deutsche Bahn have only risen by 21.36 percent in this time, while consumer prices have risen by 24.8 percent. The alleged "privilege" of the train drivers is also a myth. Over the last 10 years, the wages and salaries of all employees covered by collective agreements have risen by

an average of 28.4 percent, 7 percentage points more than those of the GDL.

Many train drivers are very interested in the reduction in working hours that is being demanded. This is because the stress—not least due to staff shortages—is getting worse and worse for them. Long shifts of over 12 hours, several weeks away from home in freight transport, several weeks without two or more days off in a row and less than 11 hours between two shifts are not uncommon. The varied rotating shifts, which usually start or end early in the morning or late at night, are an additional burden when there is no local public transport available.

The train drivers and their colleagues at Deutsche Bahn are therefore ready to fight and want to prevent a rotten compromise. On social media, drivers have bitterly rejected the latest offer from DB. “The new offer is a farce!” comments the “Eisenbahner.” Johannes says, “The contract length is a cheek,” while Philipp K. writes, “Unbelievable ... simply brazen, the way Mr. Seiler spits in the face of all his colleagues!”

It is this willingness to fight that the GDL and its chairman Claus Weselsky are responding to by organising the longest strike in its history. Despite all the terse words, Weselsky (a Christian Democrat) has repeatedly emphasised that he and the GDL want a consensus, as in previous years. They were aiming for a contract similar to those they had now concluded with 18 other companies, such as Netinera or GoAhead, he said.

The GDL has agreed to wage increases of €420 in two instalments over a period of 24 months as well as an inflation compensation payment of €3,000. The 35-hour working week will not be introduced in stages until January 1, 2028. In return, the “12 days more holiday” and “reduction in working hours” options—both without wage compensation—will no longer apply from January 1, 2026.

Many older workers in particular had opted for the 12 days’ additional holiday. The reduction in working hours is also linked to DB concluding the same agreement. While the GDL wants to increase the pressure on DB, this only proves how urgent it is to extend the fight to all employees of all railway transport companies.

On Tuesday evening, shortly after the start of the freight transport strike, the GDL also offered Deutsche Bahn a corresponding “settlement proposal” and declared its willingness to suspend the strike if DB agreed to negotiate on this basis.

However, Weselsky has already emphasised that he is “not engaged in class struggle, but in the market economy.” He is therefore refusing to call an indefinite strike, which has been agreed to by 97 percent of GDL members.

But such a full strike is necessary. After all, DB, the

federal government and the trade unions, which are cooperating closely with the coalition government, are concerned about far more than the 10,000 or so train drivers who are organised in the GDL.

The German government has decided on a massive military build-up and to support both Ukraine in its war against Russia and Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians with weapons and money. To finance this insane militarism, it is cancelling investments and cutting social, education and health spending, as well as wages.

At the same time, extensive job losses are looming in important sectors, particularly in the automotive industry, but also in the metal and chemical industries. The government and the trade union apparatuses want to push through all these attacks. This is why the train drivers are now to be made an example. After all, they enjoy much support among broad sections of the working class because they have campaigned vigorously for their demands in the past.

Above all, train drivers are confronted with the GDL leadership, which is not fundamentally different from the DGB confederation and has pushed through the same cuts in real wages in the past. Nothing is further from Weselsky’s mind than mobilising the working class against the policy of war and cuts. The striking train drivers must therefore form an independent rank-and-file action committee and their own strike leadership in order to take the collective bargaining struggle into their own hands and prevent a rotten compromise.

The WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party), are offering active support in setting up an action committee. We are mobilising the support of BVG workers and calling on all transport workers and workers in other sectors to show active solidarity and join the struggle.

Get in touch with us to start building an action committee. Send a WhatsApp message to +491633378340 or register using the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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