

“It’s important to support the strikers and not the union machine!”

Train drivers in Germany demand their strike be extended

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On Friday, WSWS reporters spoke to striking train drivers at Deutsche Bahn (DB) long-distance services and at the Berlin regional S-Bahn. While the German Train Drivers’ Union (GDL) has already backed away from its earlier demands and wants to prevent a broader mobilisation, workers at grassroots level are calling for just such an expansion of the political struggle.

The train drivers’ strike is taking place in the midst of warning strikes in the transport sector, an international uprising of farmers and mass protests against fascism and war. The grievances against which it is directed—cuts in real wages, the destruction of jobs, intolerable working conditions and social cuts—affect all workers. The WSWS is therefore calling on all workers to support the rail strike and set up action committees to extend it to their workplaces.

Several train drivers described their working conditions to WSWS reporters, and some explicitly called for a broad mobilisation against the right-wing policies of the coalition government.

“We need shorter working hours,” said Pierre, who completed his apprenticeship at DB three years ago. “I normally have a five-or six-day week with shifts of up to 10 hours, or even 12 hours if I’m on day shift. Sometimes, you finish work on one side of the city and have to see how you can get to the other side of the city in the middle of the night. All this takes extra time and is an enormous strain.

You have to adjust your sleep rhythm to the shift schedule,” he continued. “At times when everyone else is off, you either have to sleep or work. The working hours are just as strenuous for us in passenger transport as they are in freight transport. We would certainly need 20 percent more staff so that the times can be planned as necessary and the colleagues who need it can go on holiday.”

Pierre explained that the situation at DB is linked to the government’s plan 25 years ago to float it on the stock exchange. He says: “That was a political decision. We can see the consequences for staff, passengers, and infrastructure today; it was a resounding failure for us. The infrastructure belongs in the hands of the state and should be managed by it.” The

management had no understanding for the employees, he said. “There should actually be people on the board who have worked in this system themselves for years and understand what the workforce outside—train attendants, train drivers, on-board catering staff, people in the workshop—do and need. But the current management team is not accessible to us down there at all.”

Pierre is repelled by the one-sided media coverage: “When we go on strike, the media say we’re taking people hostage.” He continued, “We are dependent on solidarity in society. All workers and ‘middle-class people’ should stick together. Unfortunately, political general strikes are not permitted in Germany. Otherwise, it would be possible with us, the BVG, the hauliers and the farmers’ protests. Then the country would come to a standstill for a few days, and that would be the right signal to send out. If it wasn’t forbidden, other industries would join in. People can no longer afford to live the way they did a few years ago because of inflation and high taxes.”

Michael said: “According to my contract, I have a 39-hour week, but sometimes I work 60 to 65 hours a week. On the one day off you have, you sleep in, do your laundry and then the new week starts. Politicians talk about a turnaround in transport, but there is a shortage of young people, and we are travelling on tracks from the imperial era. If these ‘basics’ aren’t right, you can forget about the transport revolution. You don’t build a house on quicksand. Transport transition 2100 would be realistic. What DB might give us as a wage increase will be eaten up by inflation.”

Michael pointed out the blatant political contradictions: “The federal government owns DB. But it is obviously not politically desirable for transport to be shifted from car to rail. No railway lines are being built and we have worse working conditions than before. Cooling failures, germs in the water tank, no more technicians on board. The Hamburg-Berlin route used to be travelled by steam locomotive in 90 minutes. Today, we need over two hours to cover the distance. The ICE-4, the ‘flagship of the German railways,’ was put on the rails just seven years ago, and today the first ones are already broken.”

A train attendant added how she witnesses the misery: “If

passengers don't put out their cigarettes properly, fires can start. Sometimes there are stabbings. There used to be four of us, but now sometimes one train manager and one train attendant have to look after 14 carriages. That's not possible, there's no security. I didn't get down to 39 hours a week for three months; 55 or 52 hours a week is completely normal. It's not just about more money, it's about our working conditions. Many of us have families and children, but we're not at home two or three nights a week."

Michael added, "We drive less in winter, but at the end of the year you still quickly end up with 300 hours of overtime. We don't have the work-life balance that DB advertises. I haven't had a private life in the last seven years."

Uwe is a train driver for the Berlin S-Bahn (regional transit), has two children and is a member of the GDL. He supports the WSWs proposal to mobilise the working class in support of train drivers and break the divisions fostered by the unions.

Uwe said, "It's important to support the strikers and not the union apparatus. People here are taking part in the strike for different reasons. It's not necessarily the GDL's supposed '35-hour week' [which is being paid for with 12 days' holiday], but the working conditions, shift sequences and shift content. Such things are more pressing than some of the demands that the GDL puts on the agenda.

"A 48-hour break after five shifts [as demanded by the GDL] is not the same as a weekend off from Friday evening to Monday morning. But even this would be very important for us train drivers. Every rest period is enormously important. Today, even the supervisors at the railway stations have been abolished, and the train dispatching and damage reports are now done by the train driver. Many standing and rest periods have been cancelled, so we no longer even have time for a cigarette. Many career changers—we have former engineers, pilots, hairdressers—can't cope with the work pressure and are leaving the profession again. The 'old timers' can cope with the pressure because it has gradually increased. But it's bad for their health.

"Such issues should really be the responsibility of the trade union. That's why I differentiate between strikers and the apparatus. Today, a colleague showed me a photo in which [GDL leader] Klaus Weselsky is having a friendly chat with the transport policy spokesperson for the Alternative for Germany (AfD). That fits, and you could even say that the GDL is the AfD among the trade unions. It talks about solidarity but does not show solidarity with the EVG [main rail union] members. It talks about solidarity but does not show solidarity with striking nursing staff. It talks about solidarity, but ultimately it only means with itself and the dbb [German Civil Service Union], which is providing the strike funds. There is also no discussion about strike decisions and strategy in the strike centres.

"The GDL spouts populism against the DB board, but does not question the system and the causes behind it. Weselsky does not describe the privatisation of the railway as a failure.

With 'Fairtrain,' the GDL has created the rescue company which DB can use to give up freight transport and privatise it. Such a step must be discussed democratically beforehand."

Uwe has already formed a network of railway colleagues to break through the division of workers according to their union affiliation.

He added, "Why are there no solidarity strikes by the GDL together with other privatised transport companies? Many EVG members show solidarity with us, but not the EVG executive. As a worker, I don't understand this division. We have to criticise it and create perspectives on how it can work. We have to put union membership on the back burner: First and foremost, we are wage earners. We have to improve the situation for us as workers in general. That also applies to the people in the DB offices."

Uwe also emphasised the need for workers to become politically involved and take up the fight against the government's pro-war policy:

"We passed a resolution in our local group last year that all railway workers have the collective right to refuse to handle military and munitions shipments. The workers do not want to support wars that pursue capitalist interests. There will also be struggles that are directed against capitalist interests, but the current wars are wars of capitalism. Why is that not being addressed here?"

"That's why I show solidarity with the strikers and not with the apparatus. I don't want to have a 'social partnership' trade union because there can be no partnership. The interests of the workers are different. If there is a partnership with the company, then there is no representation of the workers and their rights—that is mutually exclusive.

"Everyone has reasons to take part in the strike, but identification with the organisation is dwindling. This is also the case in other sectors. Perspectives need to be created on how we as workers can come together, put forward our demands and go on strike."

The trade union bureaucracies are trying to prevent a broader discussion about the prospects for the struggle and are not shying away from censorship. On Thursday in Nuremberg, for example, the GDL attempted to ban or confiscate flyers from the *World Socialist Web Site* that demanded: "Support the train drivers' strike."

The next online meeting of the rank-and-file Rail Action Committee will take place Tuesday, January 30, at 7 p.m. Participate and invite your friends and colleagues! Get in touch with us to start building an action committee. Send a WhatsApp message to +491633378340 or register below this article.



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