

GDL train drivers union in Germany cancels strike: Take the strike into your own hands!

Marianne Arens
30 January 2024

The German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) has called off its longest ever strike against Deutsche Bahn (DB) prematurely. The train drivers returned to normal working hours this Monday. The union announced this on its website on Saturday: "GDL and DB resume collective bargaining. The GDL is breaking off industrial action early. Industrial peace is mandatory until the conclusion."

This confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* had warned of from the outset. When the ballot resulted in an overwhelming vote in favour of an indefinite strike, we warned: GDL boss "[Claus] Weselsky is using 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."

That's exactly what happened. Shortly after the start of the freight transport strike, the GDL submitted a new "settlement proposal" to the DB management last Tuesday evening and declared its willingness to suspend the strike if DB would enter into negotiations on this basis. The "settlement proposal" was based on wage agreements that GDL had concluded in recent weeks with several private railway companies such as Netinera and GoAhead and which represent massive real wage cuts.

The goal of a 35-hour week is no longer mentioned at all in the GDL communiqué on the premature cancellation of the strike. Instead, it vaguely praises DB's "willingness to negotiate a reduction in working hours for shift workers." This means that the GDL leadership has voluntarily abandoned the precise demands of the strike without consulting the strikers.

Originally, the strike was intended to achieve both a reduction in the working week from 38 to 35 hours and a €555 monthly pay rise for all employees over a period of 12 months. In the ballot, 97 percent of members voted in favour of an indefinite strike for these demands. Now they will at best receive an agreement similar to those at

Netinera and GoAhead—and probably a worse one.

The wage increase agreed there so far amounts to €420 (in two instalments) over a period of 24 months—less than half the original demand. And the introduction of the 35-hour week will not fully come into effect until January 1, 2028. In return, the "twelve days more holiday" and "reduction in working hours" options will no longer apply from January 1, 2026. Although the 12 days of additional leave were without pay compensation, many older colleagues took advantage of them.

In addition, the GDL has pledged to refrain from strike action until at least March 3, i.e., for the next five weeks. The communiqué states: "The parties to the collective agreement have set themselves a deadline of February 5 to March 3, 2024 to conduct the negotiations. During this period, industrial peace is mandatory."

But that's not all: the GDL leadership is deliberately keeping its members in the dark in the meantime, nor can they take any sort of action. It writes: "There will be no communication until the negotiations are finalised. All content, interim status, interim results etc. are subject to strict confidentiality and will not be publicised."

In this deal, the "inflation compensation payment" is once again being used to put strikers who urgently need money under massive pressure to accept any deal, no matter how bad. On Saturday, the visibly self-satisfied DB spokesperson Anja Bröker promised that an inflation compensation bonus of €1,500 would be paid as early as March.

While the GDL leadership met behind the scenes with the DB executive board in the midst of the strike to seal an agreement, they simultaneously tried to prevent any critical discussions on the picket lines. This was the experience of a supporter of the rank-and-file Rail Action Committee in Nuremberg when he distributed the *World Socialist Web Site's* flyer, "Support the train drivers' strike" to the strikers on Thursday, GDL organisers tried

to stop this and confiscate the flyer.

The cancellation of the strike and the way in which the GDL leadership is now resuming negotiations is a slap in the face for all striking train drivers. It is also directed against the many other railway workers who have supported the strikers over the last few days and have been eagerly awaiting the outcome of their struggle.

The great support that the strike has enjoyed in the working class was the real reason for the premature break-off: the train drivers' strike would have coincided with other industrial action and could have spread to other layers of workers.

Shortly after the first GDL warning strikes in December, when the result of the ballot demonstrated the train drivers' enormous willingness to fight, Weselsky suddenly interrupted the industrial action. He left it in abeyance for a whole month so that it did not coincide with the wage dispute for 2.5 million public sector employees in the federal states, which was taking place at the same time. Now, hundreds of thousands of bus, tram and underground train drivers may go on warning strikes at any time, as negotiations on the local transport collective agreement are set to begin nationwide (except in Bavaria).

At the same time, the massive protest movement against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and fascism continues to grow, and there is great unrest in the auto and supplier industry in the face of the threat of mass redundancies. Added to this are the ongoing farmers' protests.

Across Europe, strikes and protest movements are taking on an increasingly political flavour. They are not only against government austerity programmes, but also against the pro-war policies for which workers are forced to foot the bill. The coalition government in Berlin has presented a veritable austerity and war budget for 2024, which workers are expected to pay for.

In this situation, train drivers, railway employees and all workers cannot assert their legitimate interests with the union leaders, but only against them, as they all support the governments' austerity and pro-war policies.

The Rail Action Committee has already pointed this out in its appeal "Place no trust in the union leadership," which it addressed to the striking GDL members. It states: "The GDL and its leader, Claus Weselsky, are looking for a deal that they can sell as a success and that does not jeopardise the 'profitability of the railways.' (...) The GDL is neither willing nor able to wage a principled battle." This has now been clearly proven true with the

cancellation of the strike.

The Rail Action Committee, which includes union and non-union members, is inviting GDL members and all train drivers, train attendants and railway workers to take part in its upcoming online meeting on Tuesday, January 30 at 7 p.m. in order to take the strike into their own hands and make it the starting point for a broad movement against the cuts in real wages.

When it was founded last early summer, the action committee established two basic principles:

First, we stand for the principled defense of workers' rights. This means that the rights and needs of workers and their families take precedence over the profit interests of investors, shareholders and speculators.

Second, we strive for international unification and cooperation. We deliberately address our call to permanent and temporary workers, colleagues of all nationalities, regardless of whether they are members of a trade union or not. We will not be divided! For us, international cooperation and the coordination of international struggles are of the highest importance.

To build independent rank-and-file action committees together with us, make contact via Whatsapp on +49-163-337 8340 and/or register using the form. Take part in the next online meeting of the Rail Action Committee on Tuesday, 30 January, 7 pm!



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)