

The global significance of Germany's train drivers' strike

Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei
12 March 2024

On Tuesday, a strike by train drivers in Germany brought large parts of long-distance and regional transport to a standstill. According to reports, 80 percent of all trains were cancelled. On the same day, a walkout by cabin crew at Lufthansa took place. The strike will continue on Wednesday.

The strikes in Germany are part of an international upsurge of the class struggle. In Tunisia, thousands took part in anti-government demonstrations over poor living conditions and high unemployment, officially at over 50 percent. In Nigeria, where inflation is over 30 percent, workers carried out a national strike.

In France, which saw mass protests by farmers earlier this year, workers are pushing for a public services strike to coincide with the Paris Olympics. In the United States, the number of large strikes rose by 238 percent last year, while the number of workers involved in strikes quadrupled. This week, 7,000 Daimler Trucks workers in the United States voted by 96 percent to authorise strike action.

A storm is brewing in the class struggle. Workers are no longer prepared to accept falling real wages and increasing workloads. Train drivers, airport workers and public transport employees have been on strike for weeks in Germany. On several occasions, trains, buses and air traffic came to a standstill on the same day.

Nationwide strikes occurred in public transport, at airports and in Lufthansa cabins, as well as at the Ford supply park in Saarlouis. Sales staff in the retail sector have also been striking repeatedly for months. The wave of redundancies in the automotive, steel and chemical industries will drive tens of thousands into industrial action. Added to this are the militant protests by farmers against Germany's federal coalition government and the mass demonstrations against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Hospitals and schools are also in turmoil. A huge jobs massacre is taking place in industry, administrative work and the trades. Hundreds of thousands of jobs, some of them highly skilled, are being cut, particularly in the automotive and supplier industry, but the chemical, steel, construction, household appliance and software industries as well as the retail trade are also affected.

The strikes in Germany pose important issues for all workers.

They show that the fight against inflation, cuts in real wages and increasing workloads cannot be conducted under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy and is inextricably linked to the fight against war and military rearmament.

The corporations and government are not prepared to give in without a fight. The rise in share prices—the German stock market reached another all-time record yesterday—demands ever greater exploitation from the working class.

The ruling class is determined to enforce upon workers the cost, not only of rising share values, but the emergence of world war. The imperialist powers are once again pursuing their economic and geopolitical interests by military means.

After sending huge quantities of weapons and ammunition, NATO now also wants to send ground troops to Ukraine, which means a direct confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia. In the Middle East, the genocide of the Palestinians supported by Germany is developing into a regional conflagration. The danger of a third world war has never been as great as it is now.

In order to make Germany “fit for war,” Defence Minister Pistorius (Social Democratic Party—SPD) is demanding hundreds of billions more euros, in addition to the €100 billion “special fund” for the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces) agreed upon two years ago. The economy and society are being reorganised for war production.

This is the reason for the intransigent attitude of the national rail operator Deutsche Bahn board and the federal government. They want to make an example of train drivers in order to make it clear to all workers that they have to tighten their belts.

The same basic policy is being carried out everywhere. In America, Biden has continuously invoked the mobilisation of American industry in World War II in his campaign speeches, arguing that similar measures are needed for America to wage war against Russia and China. This has the full support of the union bureaucracy, with the United Auto Workers president declaring his organisation is prepared to “go to war” along with the president.

Such policies cannot be carried out democratically in any country. At this point, Washington's preferred strategy is to block strikes and impose layoffs through sellout contracts imposed by the corrupt trade union apparatus. However, as workers mobilise against such betrayals, the government is

prepared to use more direct means. Two years ago, the Biden administration intervened to ban a national strike by American railroad workers while the union bureaucrats stalled to buy the government time.

In holding back German railroad workers, the bureaucrats of the sectoral German Train Drivers' Union (GDL), the industry-wide Rail and Transit Union (EVG), public service union Verdi and others are playing the same role as their counterparts in America and around the world. Even though the GDL has now called its seventh warning strike, like all other unions, its leadership stands behind the government's pro-war policy.

GDL leader Claus Weselsky, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), agrees with the government, like all other union leaders, that the costs of the military build-up must be paid for through cuts in wages and social spending, and by increased levels of exploitation. In view of the train drivers' determination to fight, he is trying to break their resistance through fruitless limited "warning strikes."

The train drivers' wage dispute has now been going on for almost five months. In mid-December, 97 percent of the affected GDL members voted in favour of an indefinite all-out strike. Since then, seven warning strikes have taken place, which have met with public support despite the restrictions they impose on many travellers.

However, the GDL leadership refuses to organise the indefinite all-out strike demanded by the members. It has largely abandoned its original demands and offered to extend the contract term from 12 to 24 months and postpone a reduction in weekly working hours until 2028.

The Deutsche Bahn (DB) Management Board, federal government and trade unions are closely intertwined in the DB Group, which is a public enterprise under state ownership. Former members of the government and state secretaries sit on various management bodies. The intransigence of the DB management is coordinated with the government.

War abroad inevitably means class war at home—against the working class. The government, a coalition between the SPD, Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens, wants to make clear not only to railway workers, but to all workers: "This is the sacrifice you have to accept for the raging escalation of militarism." This is the significance of the "socio-political new era" proclaimed by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz!

The train drivers and the entire working class must oppose the ruling class's "new era" of war and austerity with their own "new era" of the class struggle. There must be an end to the ongoing cuts and deterioration in conditions that are constantly sold as "compromises." Workers must fight for an anti-capitalist, socialist perspective. Under capitalism, only misery, war and death await them.

There is no way forward within the GDL bureaucracy. The well-paid officials in the trade union offices look on economic events from the same perspective as the managers on company boards and the stock market speculators. They subordinate the

needs of workers and society to the corporations' insatiable thirst for profits.

A fundamental reorientation and reorganisation of society are necessary. The fight against the intransigence of the DB board and the dictates of the federal government, the defence of jobs and the struggle against war require a socialist perspective and an international strategy. The needs of working people and society must have priority over the profit interests of the corporations and banks.

The nationalist policy of the trade unions, which work closely with the government and support its pro-war policies, must be countered by the international cooperation of the working class, regardless of nationality, origin and skin colour.

That is why the establishment of independent rank-and-file action committees is so important and urgent. All over the world, from Europe to North America to Asia and Australia, workers are building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to fight attacks by management, the government and the corrupt union apparatus.

Only in this way is it possible for all workers, whether union members or not, to oppose the capitalist logic of the profit economy and the dictatorship of the trade union apparatus. Only in this way can workers take the organisation of industrial action into their own hands.

An indefinite strike by train drivers must become the prelude to a broad mobilisation against the reduction in real wages, against mass redundancies and against the government's policy of war and social cuts. Labour struggles must be united with the resistance against the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza and be directed against capitalism, the cause of war, genocide, job cuts and wage reductions. This growing movement must develop on the basis of a socialist program.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and its sister organisations in the Fourth International are fighting for this program.



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