

German train drivers' union GDL discusses accepting arbitration

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After workers on Germany's railways, public transport and airports launched nationwide strikes last week, proving once again their readiness to fight for better working conditions and wages, the trade unions are beating a retreat.

The service-sector trade union Verdi has agreed to arbitration with the Lufthansa airline, and Verdi is continuing negotiations with the local transport employers.

The German Train Drivers Union (GDL), which carried out their sixth short-term strike last week, indicated during the legal proceedings Tuesday initiated by Deutsche Bahn (DB) against the strike that it was open to arbitration. Previously, the union had vehemently refused such a proposal.

This underscores that the so-called warning strikes—time-limited strikes called on short notice by the bureaucracy—are a means of preventing the indefinite all-out strike which 97 percent of GDL members voted to approve. The GDL has already abandoned its original demands and is only calling for the adoption of the agreements it signed with 28 other railway companies: a €420 salary increase in two stages over a two-year contract and a 35-hour work week starting in 2028.

The DB board has also rejected these scaled-back demands. It has the backing of the federal government, which significantly reduced spending on the state-owned rail company in its 2024 budget and is now calling for an example to be made of train drivers. They intend to make clear to the train drivers and all workers that they must pay for rearmament and war.

The DB board knows that the GDL and the EVG (railway and transport union) do not want an open confrontation with the federal government. This has strengthened its uncompromising position. DB management is relying on the union bureaucracy's proven record of reducing real wages and dismantling long-standing achievements.

The workers, on the other hand, are prepared to fight. In rail worker groups on social media, GDL members rejected the rail company's attacks. Sven wrote: "DB offered a 36-hour week with a 30-month contract, the elimination of

12 holidays, incursion into our already small number of free weekends, the abolition of flexibility in planning work/free time schedules, a wage increase of €331 instead of €420 (the EVG got 420) and much more, which will be even worse! Do you want us to compromise? —No, I don't think so!"

Christian added, "DB was able to pay the fat bonuses to its board members without batting an eyelid, so why doesn't that happen with employee salaries on the railways?" The DB Board of Management doubled its pay in 2022 and received millions in bonuses from the Supervisory Board. GDL representative Mario Reiß also voted in favour of these pay hikes.

Contrary to what the media campaign claims, the train drivers are not "privileged." Their salary ranks at the lower end of middle-income jobs. Pay increases for GDL members in the last 10 years are below the national average. While the latter has grown by 28.4 percent since 2014, the GDL agreed to reduce real wages, and pay rates rose by 21.4 percent for its members in these 10 years. Consumer prices rose by 24.8 percent.

The workload for train drivers is also extremely high due to irregular and long shifts as well as little free time. Many workers, especially older workers, have decided to exchange part of their salary for more time off.

Andreas asked, "When does the reckoning begin for DB management? These plunderers with no connection to the grassroots deserve to be thrown out."

The rail workers must be mobilised against the DB board and the federal government. Declining real wages and worsening working conditions are just the beginning. The ruling elite is preparing further attacks that will be even more far-reaching. No wage, no working condition, no social right is safe.

This was made clear by the reaction of the political and business elites to last week's strike. In an interview with the *Rheinische Post*, the managing director of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) Steffen Kampeter warned of negative consequences for German investment.

“The damage caused by the GDL strike alone last week is estimated at €100 million per day,” he said. The strikes by the GDL, Verdi and the Independent Flight Attendant Organization (UFO) —not the refusal of the DB board to make any serious concessions—were “disproportionate.”

Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Robert Habeck (Greens) reiterated this. He said, “At the moment, there is a bit too much striking for less and less work.” In fact, “we can’t afford it right now,” he added. Workers would have to be prepared to work harder and longer.

Other business and party representatives are calling on the federal government to legally block strikes. The legal policy spokesman of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union parliamentary group, Günter Krings, called for a strike law with mandatory notice periods prior to labour disputes in critical infrastructure. The economist Veronika Grimm raised the prospect of mandatory arbitration before a strike even takes place.

The presiding judge of the Hesse State Labour Court, Michael Horcher, suggested on Tuesday that such measures be enshrined in law. Because these do not yet exist, he was compelled to reject DB’s request to stop the GDL strike by injunction.

The judge suggested formal arbitration, which the GDL had hitherto rejected. GDL representative Thomas Schelling described arbitration in court as “certainly worthy of discussion,” as the Tagesschau news program reported. “We will discuss this openly.”

This shows once again that the GDL under Claus Weselsky is unwilling to seriously confront the provocations from management and the ruling elite as a whole. Rather, he is striving for a deal through which the GDL tops can save face.

The GDL and Weselsky, emphasize at every opportunity that they defend the market economy—i.e., capitalism. However, capitalism is in its deepest crisis since the 1930s. The military redivision of the world among the great powers has already begun. With its announcement of a “new era,” the federal government is remilitarizing Germany. It is financing the war against Russia in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza in the billions of euros. As it did twice in the last century, the German ruling class is once again beginning to assert its economic and geopolitical interests by military means.

In view of the imminent threat of war and the attacks on jobs, wages and living standards, the working class must mobilise independently of the trade union bureaucracy and unite internationally against capitalism. In its statement, “The global significance of Germany’s train drivers’ strike,” the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei declared,

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...

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.

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