

German train drivers' union, GdL, submits to the dictates of the company executive

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In its current contract round the German Train Drivers' Union (GdL) has caved in to the dictates of Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Rail) and is now trying to cover its tracks with its usual bluster and evasions.

In terms of pay, the GdL has agreed a deal that amounts to less than 35 percent of its original demand. In terms of working hours, far from agreeing to a "reduction in working hours without any reduction in pay," as it claims, the union has agreed to a reduction in working hours with a reduction in real pay.

Previously, train drivers had to accept pay cuts if they wanted to work a 35-hour week instead of 38 hours. In future, they will have to increase their working hours from 35 to 40 in order to make ends meet based on the lousy wage deal agreed by the GdL. The bottom line is the same: increased stress at work while their incomes decline.

A closer look at the contract reached between the GdL and Deutsche Bahn in Berlin on March 26 confirms this: It is a complete sham.

The GdL gave up its original wage demand at an early stage. At the heart of the dispute in recent months was DB's refusal to reduce working hours for shift workers from the current 38 to 35 hours per week.

The GdL had already signalled its willingness to gradually postpone a reduction in working hours until 2028. It has now agreed to a postponement to 2029. Starting in two years' time, the basic working time for shift workers is to be reduced in four stages from 38 to 35 hours by 2029.

This postponement by one year not only means continued stress for Deutsche Bahn employees, but also has an impact on 29 other rail subsidiaries. The GdL had already agreed a 35-hour week from 2028 with these respective concerns, provided DB also agreed to such a regulation.

The GdL will now adapt the agreement with the other rail companies to the agreement struck with Deutsche Bahn, i.e., postpone the reduction in working hours by a further year. GdL boss Weselsky emphasised at a press conference in Berlin: "We don't want a bidding competition downwards." So now every rail worker must submit to the later date for

shorter hours.

Weselsky also claimed at the press conference that the GdL had succeeded in "pushing through the reduction in working hours for shift workers and the 35-hour week without any future reduction in pay." This is simply a lie. In reality, the reduction in working hours is being bought by cementing pay at the lowest level.

During the coronavirus crisis, the GdL, like many other trade unions in Germany, agreed to a massive reduction in real wages. During the term of the last contract from September 2021 to October 2023, real wages fell by at least 12 percent. The official consumer price index rose by 15.4 percent during this period, while the GdL agreed to a pay rise of just 3.3 percent in two stages.

The actual wage losses are likely to be even higher, with middle and low incomes particularly hard hit by the higher price increases for food, energy and rents.

For the current contract, the GdL had demanded a monthly pay increase of €555 for a period of 12 months in order to at least partially compensate for lost wages. Now it has agreed to €420 for a term of 26 months.

And to add insult to injury, this increase will only come into force on August 1, 2024, at the end of nine months with no increase. A second tranche of €210 will only be paid out from August 1, 2025, five months before the contract expires. In order to agree a further contract after this date, the GdL has already agreed to a two-month abstinence from any sort of industrial action after the current contract ends.

The contract's inflation compensation bonus of €2,850 and €1,425 for trainees, which is also paid out in two stages, merely serves to disguise the extent of the wage reduction. It does not affect basic pay scales and therefore has no impact on future wage deals.

In view of the escalating wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the inflation rate—currently officially at 2.5 percent—could shoot up again at any time. Now that the GdL has pledged to take no further industrial action until the end of February 2026, the only way rail workers can prevent their incomes from falling further is to work longer hours or

take up a fight independently of the unions.

The contract now reached is designed precisely for the former case. Previously, rail workers could voluntarily work up to 40 hours based on a contractual working week of 38 hours. This resulted in a pay rise of around 2.6 percent per hour. With the current deal, this regulation will be extended to the future reduction in working hours. For every additional hour worked in the week, there will be a 2.7 percent increase in pay.

From 2026, train drivers will therefore be faced with the choice of either working shorter hours for less real pay or working longer hours to cushion the declining purchasing power of their income.

The crowning glory of this package of window-dressing and deceit is the fact that the planned reduction in working hours will not take effect until the beginning of 2026, when the next contract negotiations take place. The outcome of the next contract is of course completely unknown. What is clear is that the GdL will do everything in its power to sabotage the train drivers' willingness to fight, as was the case in the current round of contract bargaining.

Not surprisingly, HR Director Martin Seiler praised the current agreement: "This is a pioneering solution that enables flexibility, participation and transformation." Work performance will be rewarded, he explained in the manner of Germany's business orientated Free Democratic Party. "We have emphasised from the outset that an outright reduction in working hours forcibly imposed on everyone is absolutely not in keeping with the times."

As the GdL has also agreed to the abolition of the previous 12-day holiday model, Deutsche Bahn expects that the total volume of work for train drivers is unlikely to decrease. Previously, train drivers could take up to 12 additional days' holiday, six of which they had to compensate for by working overtime and six by taking a pay cut. Older colleagues in particular, who were no longer able to cope with the increasing work stress, had made use of this option.

Now, only six days of additional leave are possible, which must be compensated by working overtime, while additional leave is no longer possible if income is reduced. "In order to increase capacity and boost productivity, further agreements have been reached," the company proclaimed. "Among other things, the 12-day holiday model will be abolished on January 1, 2026."

The growing financial pressure on employees will allow DB to continue as before with too few staff and a run-down infrastructure with its employees paying the price.

It should also be noted that the GdL has stabbed its colleagues in network operations and maintenance in the back and postponed their demand for an extension of their collective agreements with the new DB subsidiary InfraGO

AG and RegioNetz Infrastruktur GmbH until the next round of contract bargaining.

The miserable GdL deal results from the continuous refusal of the GdL leadership under Claus Weselsky to wage a real fight for the workforce's justified demands. In December 2023, 97 percent of GdL members voted in favour of an indefinite strike in a ballot, but the GdL had no intention of organising it.

After six limited "warning strikes," in which train drivers demonstrated their willingness to fight, Weselsky and company reached a sellout deal with the railway management behind closed doors. This confirms that not only is the company union, the EVG, in the pocket of rail management, this also applies to the GdL.

This underlines the importance of building the Rail Action Committee, which was founded during the EVG strike last summer. It unites railway workers across specific trade union and company boundaries. Its orientation is clear:

- No confidence in the EVG and GdL! The rights and needs of employees take priority over the profit interests of investors and shareholders or the political aims of the German government.

- The latest contract must be put to a vote by the GdL leadership. The action committee will call for the sellout to be rejected and for the fight to be taken into our own hands.

In order to realise this, it is necessary to further develop the action committee. We invite all railway workers to take part in the joint online meeting next Tuesday, 2 April, at 19.00 CET to discuss the GdL agreement, its consequences and the next steps to be taken. Note the address of the meeting: <https://meet.wsws.org/Aktionskomitee>



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