

The German Train Drivers Union wage settlement and the government's pro-war policy

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The wage settlement that the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) has agreed with Deutsche Bahn supports the government in shifting the costs of rearmament and war onto the working class. What GDL boss Claus Weselsky grandiosely describes as a reduction in working hours, with full wages maintained, is in fact the opposite: a reduction in real wages and an open-ended "working time corridor" leading to longer working hours and lower pay.

The German government is talking about a "socio-political turning point," meaning that the costs of war are being imposed on the working class through cuts in wages and social provisions. The outcome of the GDL's negotiations fulfils this requirement.

For the first nine months—retroactive from the end of the contract on October 31, 2023 until the end of July 2024—the union has agreed a pay freeze. If it had pushed through the original demand of €555 per month, this would have meant an increase in income of €4,995. Instead, an inflation compensation "bonus" of €2,850 will be paid out in two instalments.

These one-off payments are not incorporated into the basic pay scales and therefore have no impact on future collectively agreed salaries. Considering the 26-month term, these will only increase by €194 per month, instead of the initial demand of €555. At best, this compensates for the current inflation rate, but not for the massive losses in real wages of the past two years, which amount to at least 12 percent. This means wages will remain far below the pre-pandemic level in the long term.

The introduction of a so-called "working time corridor" in conjunction with the gradual reduction of the reference working time from 38 to 35 hours

between 2026 and 2029 are directly linked to this reduction in real wages. In order to make ends meet, train drivers will have to work longer instead of less in the future.

The continuing loss of purchasing power will force them to extend their working hours despite the growing work pressures. Older colleagues who are no longer able to do this will have to accept a lower income and will still be available to work within the limits of their capacity.

The conservative *Die Welt* was therefore jubilant, writing, "A reduction in working hours, as is now the case at Deutsche Bahn, seems fatal in times of labour shortages. But that falls short of the mark. A look at Germany's real problems and at France shows that the 35-hour week can actually lead to more work and performance on balance."

The Springer newspaper points out that although France has officially had a 35-hour week since 2000, "de facto, however, the French work more and more efficiently than the Germans (1,520 hours per year versus 1,349)." Reason: "Because the 35-hour week is not an upper limit there, as it will be for Deutsche Bahn in future." The working time corridor introduced with the 35-hour week can be opened up further at any time in view of the "socio-political turnaround" and lead to a drastic increase in weekly working hours.

The long duration of the contract of more than two years is also linked to war policy. Germany is increasingly becoming a logistical hub for NATO. The government wants to ensure that the transport of weapons, military equipment and troops by rail runs smoothly and is not disrupted by train drivers taking strike action.

Even after the contract expires at the end of 2025, GDL has agreed to refrain from striking for a longer period of time. They have agreed an industrial truce for the following two months. If no agreement is reached during this period, both parties may not declare failure, but must consider arbitration. During this period, there is also a collective labour agreement and therefore a ban on strikes.

In other words, the collective agreement ties the workers hands behind their backs and which, under conditions of rapid war development, is intended to deprive a strategically important section of the working class of any opportunity to strike.

War and rearmament are the response of the ruling class to the deep international crisis of capitalism. They are therefore not temporary phenomena. After decades of orgies of enrichment on the stock markets, the impoverishment of broad sections of the population and growing economic conflicts, capitalism is on the brink of an immense outbreak of violence. The imperialist powers are once again pursuing their economic and geopolitical interests by military means.

War abroad inevitably means war at home—against the working class. In this conflict, the trade unions stand unreservedly on the side of the government and the employers. GDL leader Claus Weselsky, a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), agrees with the government, as do all other trade union leaders, that the costs of military armament should be financed through cuts in wages and social spending and increased levels of exploitation at work.

In view of the train drivers' determination to fight, Weselsky has used the trade union apparatus to fragment their resistance into fruitless, temporary warning strikes. In mid-December, 97 percent of the affected GDL members voted in favour of an indefinite all-out strike. However, the GDL leadership refused to organise it and agreed to a deal that means a massive deterioration.

It is necessary to face the reality that there is no way forward with the GDL and the other unions. The well-paid officials in the union offices regard economic events from the same perspective as the managers on the company boards and the speculators on the stock markets. They subordinate the needs of workers and society to the profit interests of the corporations.

A fundamental reorientation and reorganisation of

society is necessary. The struggle against cuts in real wages and ever-increasing workloads, the defence of jobs and the fight against war require a socialist perspective and an international strategy. The needs of the working class and society 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 it pro-war policy, must be countered by the international cooperation of the working class, regardless of nationality, origin and skin colour.

This is why the establishment of independent rank-and-file action committees is so important and urgent. Only in this way is it possible for workers—union members and non-members alike—to oppose the logic of the capitalist 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, develop international cooperation, and develop the necessary political self-confidence in the discussion about a socialist perspective.

The train drivers and the entire working class must counter the ruling class's "turning point" with their own; there must be an end to the ongoing cuts and deterioration in conditions that are being sold as "compromises." Workers must fight for an anti-capitalist, socialist perspective.

In order to implement this, the action committee invites all railway workers to take part in the joint online meeting next Tuesday, April 2, at 7 p.m. to discuss the GDL wage settlement, its consequences and the next steps. Save the address of the meeting: <https://meet.wsws.org/Aktionskomitee>

Get in touch with the railway action committee via Whatsapp on +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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