

German train drivers' union announces approval of collective agreement with Deutsche Bahn

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The German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) announced on Thursday in Frankfurt that 77 percent of its members voted in favor of accepting the collective agreement the union reached with Deutsche Bahn (DB, the German rail company) on March 25. The GDL provided no information on the turnout.

The GDL only needs 25 percent of the votes in order to accept the agreement because it had previously held a vote on an indefinite full strike, which requires 75 percent approval for acceptance. Conversely, a minority of 25 percent is sufficient to accept the collective agreement.

This is a mechanism used to force through poor collective bargaining results. The GDL leadership boycotted an indefinite strike, which 97 percent of GDL members voted in favor of, in December 2023. With this disregard for a democratic vote, the GDL is no different from the other major German unions, like the service provider union Verdi and the other large rail union, EVG, which took a similar approach last year in their collective bargaining at the Post and DB in order to push through massive attacks against their workers.

The GDL's undemocratic approach is further underscored by the fact that the text of the agreement was not available to GDL members at the time of the vote. The voting documents that union members received by mail starting April 10 contained hardly any information about the contract's details. The GDL only listed in shorthand the supposed "most important results of the collective agreement."

This information was no more instructive than the short press statements and videos by GDL boss Claus Weselsky, who glorified the agreement as "historic" because working hours would allegedly be reduced between 2026 and 2029. The ballot itself, which should actually be neutral, states in bold text: 'We fought unwaveringly and we won!'

In a statement on April 9, the Rail Action Committee exposed that the collective agreement is a sham and called for the sell-out to be rejected.

This is because nothing remains of the original wage demand for a monthly pay rise of €555 over a period of 12 months. The GDL has agreed to €420 in two stages for a term of 26 months, which is an annualized €194 instead of €555 per month! Based on an average income of €3,400 gross monthly wage, this is 5.7 percent per year and therefore hardly more than the EVG agreed with DB in 2023.

In addition, the GDL has agreed to the abolition of the 12-day vacation model as of January 1, 2026. And it has entirely dropped its demand for a contract for the new DB subsidiary InfraGo (formerly DB Netze and DB Station & Service).

This pay increase hardly compensates the cost of living increases expected during the contract period that ends in 2025. Under no circumstances does it compensate for the real wage losses of previous years.

During the coronavirus crisis, the GDL, like many other unions, has agreed to a massive reduction in real wages. In the term of the last collective agreement from September 2021 to October 2023, the official consumer price index rose by 15.4 percent. However, the GDL only agreed to a pay rise of 3.3 percent, in two stages. This was the reason for the demand for €555 per month: It was supposed to compensate for a real wage loss of at least 12 percent.

This did not happen. And that is why the GDL leadership's talk of a "historic" agreement is pure propaganda that deliberately distorts and disregards these facts.

The GDL claims that DB has agreed a reduction in working hours of three hours per week for shift workers, without a pay cut. However, the pay cut has already taken place, in the years 2021 to 2023—by 12 percent in real terms. Three hours, on the other hand, only accounts for around 8 percent of current working hours.

The train drivers affected will therefore earn 12 percent less in real terms at the beginning of 2029 than they did in

2021, with working hours reduced by eight percent. And that is only if the GDL does not agree any further real wage cuts over the next five years—which it will, if not prevented from doing so.

DB consistently rejected a genuine reduction in working hours. In the end, the management around CEO Richard Lutz and HR Director Martin Seiler only signed off on the agreement with the GDL because the latter accepted that, firstly, the reduction in working hours was voluntary and, secondly, that working hours could even be increased to 40 hours.

Seiler expressly praised the introduction of this “work time corridor” of 35 to 40 hours. This ensures that the reduction in working hours, which the GDL describes as “historic,” remains a theoretical one. GDL members have made this clear on social media: “The reduction in working hours will only exist on paper.”

This is because, in view of past and future real wage cuts, hardly anyone will be able to live on the wages of a 35-hour week. Secondly, DB will not hire the necessary staff to enable shift workers to actually work “only” 35 hours.

In its call to reject the draft collective agreement, the Rail Action Committee wrote: “Once again, Weselsky’s bluster is proving to be hot air. In all points, the GDL leadership has not implemented the interests of the employees, but those of DB. This is the result of Weselsky’s principle that he is ‘in the market economy, not in the class struggle.’”

In fact, the GDL, which is part of the German Civil Service Union, is in no way different from DGB unions such as the EVG. Without exception, both represent the interests of the companies and the state, which in the case of DB is the sole owner.

In terms of war policy, the EVG, GDL and all other trade unions are united behind the federal coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and Greens. This coalition is investing hundreds of billions of euros in armament and the militarization of the whole of society; supporting Ukraine politically, with money and with weapons in its proxy war against Russia; and supporting Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians.

The costs of all this are to be financed through wage cuts, cuts in social programs and increased exploitation. In this matter, Weselsky, a member of the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), and all other trade union leaders are in alignment with the government. It is the reason for the actions of the trade unions, including the GDL, in past, current and upcoming wage negotiations. They are jointly developing the mechanisms to enforce these attacks against workers.

Workers are facing a united front of government, corporations and unions. Contrary to all claims by the GDL

that it has reached a “historic” agreement with DB, this agreement, just like that of the EVG last year, will be the starting shot for further attacks on jobs, working conditions and wages.

The DB Management Board has already begun to do this at DB Cargo. The freight division, which is responsible for the transportation of weapons, ammunition and military vehicles, among other things, is to be made profitable and “war-ready”—at the expense of its employees. Thousands of jobs are to be cut, work stress increased and wages reduced.

This again makes clear that the interests of railroad workers can only be defended independently of the trade union apparatus. In several warning strikes and in two ballots, in which they voted almost unanimously for indefinite full strikes, all employees—whether organized in the GDL or the EVG—have shown their willingness to fight. However, GDL and EVG have refused to seriously fight against the railroads and the government.

This is why the establishment of the Railway Action Committee is so critical. Railroad workers who have come together in this committee place their rights and needs above the profit interests of investors and shareholders and the political interests of the German government. They speak out clearly against militarization and do not want to be complicit in the carnage in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza by transporting military equipment by rail.

The entire collective bargaining process must therefore be rejected, from the secret negotiations behind closed doors to the disregard of the democratic decision to strike, the concealment of the collective agreement text and the approval of the agreement with a vote of just 25 percent.

The GDL top management has no right to sign an agreement that has been reached in this way and which, moreover, is not available to its members.

The Rail Action Committee will discuss these issues next Tuesday, April 30, 2024, at its online meeting at 7 p.m. We are call on all railroad workers who want to fight for their interests to join the action committee and take part in the next meeting. Contact us via WhatsApp at +49-163-337 8340 and register using the form below.



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