

Four fatal work accidents on Germany's railways in just four weeks

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21 May 2025

On Wednesday, 14 May, an employee at the railway maintenance depot in Wittenberge, Germany suffered a severe shock when, during his 3 p.m. rounds, he discovered a coworker lying lifeless on the floor. The 38-year-old had apparently fallen while carrying out sandblasting work. Emergency services were called but could only confirm the worker's death.

The horrific fatal accident at the Wittenberge repair workshop is by no means the only one on the railways in Germany. Including the May 14 death, there have been at least five such incidents in the four weeks since Easter alone:

- On Easter Monday, 21 April, a 52-year-old railway worker died in Kehl, in the state of Baden-Württemberg, in the port area on the Rhine. While shunting, he became caught between the buffers while coupling two carriages, was trapped and fatally injured.

- On Sunday, 27 April, a railway worker was killed in an accident at the Neuseddin marshalling yard in Brandenburg. He also got caught between two carriages and was crushed to death.

- On Tuesday, 29 April, a 58-year-old construction worker in Hamburg was hit by an Intercity Express (ICE) train. He survived with serious injuries and is now out of danger, but will be scarred for life.

- On Friday, 9 May, another worker was trapped between two freight wagons. The 50-year-old was working as a safety officer at the railway maintenance depot in Oberhausen in Upper Bavaria. While accompanying a slowly moving wagon, he fell onto the track between the trains and was fatally injured.

Despite the bloody toll, neither national rail operator Deutsche Bahn nor the EVG and GDL rail unions are taking any notice. The EVG has not once this year commented on any specific work accident on the railways.

That is one of the reasons why the rank-and-file founded the Rail Action Committee in Germany two years ago. Independent of management and unions, it is directed to all rail workers whether they are union members or not. Its goal is to jointly defend wages, jobs and working conditions against massive corporate attacks. It stresses that workers' allies are not the managers and union officials, many of whom hold lucrative supervisory board positions, but rail workers throughout Europe and around the world.

In the United States, a rank-and-file committee of auto workers, affiliated with the RAC through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), has also recently begun an independent investigation into a workplace accident. Ronald Adams, a 63-year-old mechanic, was killed while servicing a robot when a gantry crane suddenly started moving. Neither management nor the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA), nor the United Auto Workers have brought any facts to light in the six weeks since the accident to inform the family and the public.

A comment from a GM worker in the Detroit area hit the nail on the head: "A worker dies, and a day later the story is forgotten. The union leadership is part of the problem."

The only way to uncover the cause of every single accident and prevent them from happening again is for workers to take the investigation into their own hands. They know the work process and all its dangers best. This also applies to workplace accidents at Deutsche Bahn. As another worker said: "Safety is the best way to survive."

As the Rail Action Committee has revealed, there were at least eleven serious or fatal accidents at work on the German railways last year alone. In the previous

year, there were at least twelve (and possibly more) such accidents.

There is no authority in Germany that systematically records all railway accidents. Neither Deutsche Bahn, the Federal Rail Authority (EBA) nor the Federal Railway Accident Investigation Authority (BEU) take responsibility for this. They are especially uninterested when it comes to the employees of subcontractors.

The latest accident at Wittenberge, as usual, was covered in the media with little more than a brief police statement. It also raises numerous questions, especially given that the worker was engaged in sandblasting, a dangerous activity.

Did the man have the right respiratory equipment to protect himself against sand, quartz and fine dust particles? Was his work area—apparently indoors—adequately ventilated? What caused him to fall? Did he suffer from pre-existing respiratory conditions? Or did he trip and fall into the high-pressure jet? Particularly important: why was this worker apparently working alone in such a dangerous job?

An independent investigation is crucial to finding out the truth. It will involve safety experts, take reports and statements from employees seriously and carry out its work independently of management and trade unions. This is the only way to uncover systemic violations of safety regulations and prevent future deaths.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls on rail workers, train drivers and all workers to participate in the work of the action committees: Send us reports on conditions in your workplace! Help us uncover the causes of workplace accidents so we can fight for better conditions at work! This is part of the struggle to lay the foundations for real workers' control.



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