

Trial begins in Hanover: The death of rail apprentice Simon Hedemann and the responsibility of Deutsche Bahn

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On Monday, March 2, the trial began at the Hanover District Court concerning the fatal accident on September 8, 2023 at the Hanover-Linden freight yard, when 19-year-old railway apprentice Simon Hedemann was run over and killed by a freight train. The very first day of the trial showed that national rail operator Deutsche Bahn is not prepared to take any responsibility for the senseless death, let alone face any consequences from it.

A 37-year-old signal mechanic for Deutsche Bahn (DB) is on trial today. The public prosecutor accuses him of negligent manslaughter. The worker is alleged to have made an inadequate risk assessment and ordered so-called “self-protection” for the work on that day. The political and operational responsibility of Deutsche Bahn, on the other hand, remains in the dark.

In reality, it is the management board and the government, which owns the railway, who belong in the dock. They are responsible for the fact that their employees, and even the apprentices entrusted to them, can be exposed to such an obvious danger to life and limb. The charge of negligent manslaughter should be directed against them.

On that fateful Friday, a small squad from the former DB Netz AG (now DB InfraGo) was tasked with attaching QR tags to control boxes on the track. Instead of closing the tracks to carry out the work, however, it was the youngest, an inexperienced apprentice of all people, who was supposed to carry out the work while trains were running, while the other two workers were to warn him of approaching trains by shouting. Working under “self-protection” is the name of this murderous mission on an open track at a busy freight yard.

When a freight train approached at a speed of around 90 km/h at 9:40 a.m., Simon Hedemann was unable to get to safety in time despite warning shouts from his colleagues; he was hit by the train and died at the scene of the accident.

The very first day of the trial made clear how irresponsibly Deutsche Bahn has been acting for years, and how sloppily the investigation into the case has been conducted. DB has not ordered an external, thorough investigation into Simon Hedemann’s death, nor has it drawn any consequences from it since to prevent further devastating fatalities.

The responsible body, the Federal Railway Authority (EBA), refrained from carrying out an independent investigation. In response to a query from the *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, the EBA apparently replied that it had reviewed the documents. However, no discernible consequences were drawn from this. The Federal Bureau of Railway Accident Investigation (BEU) replied to a query from the WSWs that

it had “initiated no investigations into the accident you described,” without providing further explanation.

In court, a representative of the Federal and Railway Accident Insurance scheme spoke, whose assessment after the accident has apparently become part of the trial files, as there is no official expert report. The statement of this witness was unequivocal: due to the curved layout of the tracks, the railway workers could not see the trains in time at all from the place where they were working.

“The clear view of the approach route of a train of 670 metres was not given,” the witness stated. As he explained, trains travel on these tracks at speeds of up to 120 km/h. Also, the distance between the two tracks where Simon had to work is only 4 metres, i.e., there was no adequate safety space into which he could have quickly retreated. For this work, both tracks should have been closed!

Simon’s parents, Silke Hedemann and Steffen Rach, took part in the trial as joint plaintiffs. They brought with them a picture of their son who had been killed. As they told the WSWs, they considered the procedure followed by DB to be completely inadequate and therefore had brought in two independent experts. In the eyes of these experts (as in those of any reasonable observer), working under “self-protection” or “personal protection” at such a large and busy freight yard should be ruled out from the outset. However, their expert report was not discussed on the first day of the trial.

Since the accident, DB has not changed any practical procedures whatsoever, nor has it introduced any stricter guidelines. In the trial, a DB district manager responsible for safety confirmed that no changes to operational procedures had been made after the accident. He answered this question with a clear “No.”

The DB district manager stated that there were “no specific instructions from the company as to where and how to secure, but rather all teams must decide this for themselves”—a statement that makes any experienced railway worker balk. Years ago, practically every movement in railway traffic was dictated by a sophisticated set of rules; the maxim applied was “Safety before punctuality and economy.” But today it is supposed to be normal to send an apprentice to a main track while train operations are running.

How did this come about? This can only be understood in the context of the constantly increasing stress in DB work processes. The decision as to whether the tracks should be closed was made that morning practically immediately prior to the execution of the work and fell under the pressure of not affecting the timetable.

At the trial, the accused had his lawyer state that in everyday life, the existing rules stood in a “tension with the demands of punctual

train operations.” Every closure of the tracks entailed delays in train traffic. The signal mechanic had verbally informed the responsible dispatcher of his intention, and the latter had not objected.

The dispatcher, who also testified, asserted that he had not known that this involved work on the main track (where both suburban commuter trains and long-distance trains regularly pass through). “There would have been the possibility to close the track, one does that quite often.” As a rule, however, the dispatcher would only be informed of pending work at very short notice.

The picture that emerges depicts a situation of intense work pressures, in which employees have to make life-and-death decisions practically “on the fly,” always under the burden of keeping to the timetable. Such a situation inevitably leads to even existing safety rules being hollowed out and compromised and even experienced railway workers simply disregarding the knowledge they have acquired—with truly fatal consequences.

Deutsche Bahn is responsible for this. It is not only the responsible employer, it also provides a central infrastructure of public services and, as such, is accountable to the population.

The DB group is still owned by the federal government, which only last year approved a special fund of €500 billion for war-related “infrastructure.” But these funds are not being used to improve occupational safety and for the welfare of railway workers. They serve the government’s plan to make the whole of society—including the railways—fit for war as quickly as possible, and they also seep into private pockets. (The bonuses of the DB management board are notorious following the €1.2 million payment for former CEO Richard Lutz).

The funds are used according to the logic of profit and efficiency, not for the welfare of society and railway staff. For reasons of profit, DB is even in the process of cutting up to 6,000 jobs in its freight division DB Cargo, which will once again exacerbate the pressure on staff considerably.

The entire case is a clear example of the contempt with which the vital interests of railway workers and the entire working class are treated. Instead of seriously naming the systemic flaws and providing a remedy, an individual, the employee acting on the ground, is hung out to dry as a scapegoat. Nothing changes in the operational process, creating the conditions for new fatalities. Railway workers are being consumed “like in a war,” as a worker once told the WSWS.

This is indicated by the increasingly frequent accidents on the railways. Last year alone, there were at least 12 fatal workplace accidents on the railways, including four fatal accidents in just four weeks last spring. At least nine other workers were severely injured.

In 2023, only a few days after Simon Hedemann’s death, a very similar accident occurred in Cologne-Kalk. On September 11, 2023, Ali Ceyhan, 33, was hit by a train and severely injured during track work at Trimborner Strasse in Cologne. He died just three days later. In Cologne, too, customary security specifications had not been adhered to. There, too, safe distances and visibility conditions for work on an active track were completely inadequate.

Ali Ceyhan’s partner, Katharina Duarte, had also come to Hanover to attend the trial over Simon Hedemann’s death. “I am doing everything so that no one else ends up in the same situation as us, losing a loved one,” Katharina told the WSWS.

As was already becoming apparent on the first day of the trial, however, it is impossible to change conditions through a court case. What is necessary is the self-organisation of railway workers and all workers to enforce an external and public investigation. Only in this

way can the deeper causes and responsibilities be uncovered and concrete changes proposed.

This is the purpose of the initiative to build independent, democratically elected rank-and-file action committees. Since companies, authorities and trade unions like the EVG and GDL do not act, employees must become active themselves. Such action committees will document and publicise working conditions; they will collect information about accidents and warn colleagues. They will also seriously enforce protective measures such as the closure of tracks on which work is being carried out and take up the struggle to improve the working and living conditions of railway workers—and not the profits of the shareholders.

One example is the investigation into the death of Ronald Adams in Detroit, which the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) organised last July. Adams, an autoworker, had been crushed to death by an overhead crane at Stellantis. Around 100 workers, relatives, colleagues and experts took part in a hearing, which also received statements from international colleagues. This investigation was a strong prelude to the independent organisation of autoworkers in the region.

At that hearing, which took place in Detroit on July 27, 2025, David North, international editorial board chairman of the WSWS, pointed to the important connection between the accumulating injuries and fatalities in the workplace and the capitalist profit system. He said:

“The term ‘accident’ is often used, but is this term appropriate? If you walk across your room and trip, that might be an accident. But when we experience events that occur with astonishing regularity, then they are no longer mere coincidences in the conventional sense of the word. We see how it inevitably comes to this. ...

It is the result of the system in which we live, not only in this country, but in all parts of the world. Our social life, our economic life is organised in such a way that it constantly produces these disasters, and they will continue unless a way is found to end the system that produces these disasters.”

The trial will continue on March 16.



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