

Germany: Verdict in trial for death of railway apprentice Simon Hedemann

Deutsche Bahn signal mechanic sentenced to fine of €6,300 for negligent manslaughter

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Our social life, our economic life, is organized in a way that continuously produces these disasters, and they will continue until a way is found of putting an end to the system which produces them. What is the system? What is this social organization? It is the capitalist system (*David North at the IWA-RFC hearing in Detroit on the death of Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr.*)

On Wednesday, March 25, the trial concerning the death of the young railway worker Simon Hedemann concluded in Hanover. The 19-year-old railway apprentice was killed by a fast-moving freight train at the busy Hanover-Linden freight yard on September 8, 2023.

The Hanover District Court sentenced a 37-year-old signal mechanic for national rail operator Deutsche Bahn (DB) to a fine of €6,300 for negligent manslaughter. This is just below the sentence at which he would be considered to have a criminal record.

The signal mechanic had led the construction crew of the former DB Netz AG (now DB InfraGo) and decided that Simon should attach new QR tags to a track under “self-protection” rules, i.e., without closing the tracks. His colleagues were supposed to warn the young man of approaching trains merely by shouting. But a freight train, travelling at approximately 90 km an hour, knocked Simon over and killed him on the spot.

The public prosecutor had demanded an eight-month suspended prison sentence, plus a fine. The defence lawyer pleaded for acquittal and claimed that at DB, every employee was personally responsible for their own safety. The accused had allegedly warned Simon of the approaching train in good time by shouting “Train coming,” but the latter had not reacted. In other words, Simon was, in principle, responsible for his own death.

The judge clearly rejected this. The accused had clearly made mistakes and taken a wrong decision in the position for which he bore responsibility when he sent Simon onto the track under the “self-protection” rules. However, the accused had not been alone in his misjudgement. Even during the police interrogation, neither his direct superior nor the dispatcher had expressed doubts about the accused’s decision.

Simon’s parents, who appeared as joint plaintiffs in the trial, had their own say on the last day. They made clear: “Had we known all that we have now learned about the railways, Simon would never have

written an application and signed his training contract there!”
The mother called it “sad and incomprehensible”:

- that such a terrible accident could happen to Simon during his training period, even though as an apprentice he should actually have been subject to a special duty of care;
- that we as relatives were left in the dark about what happened for more than two and a half years;
- that no one of those responsible at the railway and the Wülfel base contacted us;
- that during the trial no one approached us, let alone did the accused and the witnesses look at us. All eye contact was avoided. ...

She summarised what she has learned about the railway:

Simon was just a personnel number that has now been removed from the system. A system that drives employees to bypass rules and regulations in order not to disrupt the smooth running of the operational plan and to avoid train delays through, e.g., line closures. Only the economic aspect seems to be in the foreground. Simon had to pay for this with his life.

In truth, the exact circumstances of the fatal accident remained in the dark until the end. “Many question marks remain,” the judge also said. The parents confirmed that if these questions are not clarified, “then it can happen again any day.”

In particular, the question remained unresolved as to whether there had, in reality, been two trains that passed in front of and behind the trainee practically simultaneously. A single witness, the third worker of the construction crew, had spoken of a second train. Astonishingly, however, this question was not pursued further in the trial.

A trial observer, the physicist Roland Morlock, member of a group of critical engineers from Baden-Württemberg, participated in the trial as an expert adviser to the parents. In conversation with this author, he confirmed the theory of the second train. He had inspected the scene of the incident, observed the frequency of the trains and compared it

with the timetable at the time.

“A detailed reconstruction of the events of the accident is still needed,” stated Morlock. However, the official version was “extremely questionable. Based on our insight into the file material, we have come to the conclusion that there were probably two trains.”

But if another train actually passed the accident site at the same moment, then Simon possibly was unable to hear the warning shouts at all. Or the shouts were misunderstood by him, so that he related them to the first train, which he did see and which he had avoided, while a second one was already roaring up from behind.

Simon had no chance because there was no safe space to avoid two trains. The gap between the two tracks was not even four metres. “We cannot easily prove that today,” Morlock noted. “But it is the most likely explanation.”

The real scandal is that Deutsche Bahn itself covered up the possibility that there were two trains. There was no proper investigation of the accident. “The record of the accident shows gaps, and investigations were not carried out at a sufficiently careful level,” was Morlock’s assessment. None of the responsible railway authorities—neither the Federal Railway Authority (EBA) nor the Federal Bureau of Railway Accident Investigation (BEU)—had thoroughly investigated this accident.

Only the Federal and Railway Accident Insurance scheme had commissioned a representative to assess the accident. On the first day of the trial, he comprehensibly explained that on the track section in question, where trains also pass at 120 km an hour, the visibility required for “self-protection” did not exist. It became perfectly clear: if this work was not to be a suicide mission, then a temporary closure of the tracks was the only correct way to conduct it!

This was also confirmed by a final witness who was summoned for the last day of the trial at the request of the joint plaintiffs. This person, whose duties include checking compliance with all accident prevention rules, testified that the staffing ratio was so poor that some operations were never inspected at all.

He explained what the rules “normally” entailed: Firstly, a clearly formulated “work order” must be available 20 days in advance. Secondly, a professional safety officer must carry out a risk assessment to determine the safeguarding method to be used.

But the crux lay in the exceptions to the rule: If the headquarters ordered “short-term work of a minor scope,” then the procedure is shortened. All control procedures are bypassed, and the risk assessment is left to the employees on site—who have no training for it at all.

On this point, railway expert Morlock said, “It creeps in like that because people have much less work with the ‘minor’ orders.” It becomes clear that this accident did not just begin that morning. It began with the way this work on the track had been organised.

In practice, this is apparently the norm. During the trial, in response to the judge’s questions, several railway employees confirmed that, since the death of Simon Hedemann, Deutsche Bahn had made absolutely no changes to the workflow and rules in order to follow its own guidelines in practice. On the contrary, economic pressure is constantly increasing, jobs are being cut, and the remaining railway workers are subjected ever more brutally to the economic pressure about which Simon’s mother spoke.

Time and again, terrible accidents occur. Only on March 9, 2026, another fatal railway accident occurred in Cottbus, in which a 23-year-old railway worker lost his life during shunting operations. In 2025, at least 12 fatal occupational accidents occurred on the railways, and at

least nine other workers were severely injured.

And in March 2026 alone there were at least three further railway accidents, which did not result in death but sometimes resulted in severe injuries:

- On March 5, a worker, 41, was severely injured during vegetation cutting on the Hamburg-Lübeck ICE (express) line. He tried to remove a branch from the overhead line, which caused an electrical arc, and he suffered a severe electric shock and was taken to hospital with burns.

- Just a week later, on March 12, a train on the Hamburg Port Railway collided with a car; a 22-year-old railway worker, who was riding at the front as a shunting attendant, was trapped by the car and severely injured.

- And on March 20, there was another accident in the Port of Hamburg when a freight train collided with a lorry. A wagon derailed and two people were slightly injured.

The trial in Hanover has shown that a court case will not change these conditions. It can only cast light on them and present them to the public. To better ensure the safety of railway workers, it is necessary that they organise themselves in independent rank-and-file committees. This must be done independently of the railway trade unions EVG and GDL, which work closely with railway management and are tied to the responsible governing parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU).

Only such self-organisation of railway workers can establish awareness among colleagues of the daily dangers and awaken an understanding of the root causes in the capitalist profit system that underlie the deadly conditions. Only in this way can rail workers be protected and living conditions—not the profits of the shareholders—be improved.

The allies of rail workers in this struggle are the workers of all countries facing the same major shareholders, banks and railway companies, as well as workers in other industries confronting the same struggles as that at Deutsche Bahn. For example, construction workers face similar dangers as do railway workers: tight cost calculations, constant work pressures and the passing on of many tasks to subcontractors. All these factors yield short-term savings but inevitably lead to more workplace accidents.



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