Deadly rail accident in Essen-Katernberg exposes murderous working conditions at Deutsche Bahn

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On October 25, a track worker was struck and killed by an inter-city express (ICE) train in Essen (North Rhine-Westphalia). His colleague was also seriously injured. It is the latest in a long, bloody series of workplace accidents at German railway company Deutsche Bahn.

It was well past 11:00 p.m. on a Sunday night when the group of six track workers were on their way home from work. Their job was to keep the tracks clear of undergrowth, and it seems their employers recognise neither weekends nor night-time rest periods. The workers, no doubt tired and exhausted, were walking along the tracks in the Katernberg district of Essen when they reached the point where the railway crosses a road and the verges are narrow.

An ICE train came hurtling along at full speed, and two young workers were struck by the train: a 39-year-old man died at the scene of the accident, while his 28-year-old colleague was seriously injured. He was rescued from the track area using a fire brigade turntable ladder and taken to a specialist hospital. The ICE train driver, who suffered severe shock, also required psychological support.

No photograph of the worker who was killed has been released, nor has there been a public obituary. The terse sentences from the police report are all the public has been told. Questions also remain unanswered as to whether the seriously injured man survived, how he is faring, and what will become of the train driver who was unable to prevent the disaster. Even less is known about the exact circumstances that led to the horrific accident, and whether any measures are being taken to prevent such incidents in future. The criminal investigation department is looking into whether “the rules were followed.”

This gruesome rail accident is not an isolated incident. Admittedly, public sources make it almost impossible to form a complete picture of all recent incidents, as much is covered up, concealed or played down. Yet the difficult conditions lead to risky and highly dangerous situations almost daily. Here are just a few of the fatal and serious rail accidents that preceded the tragedy in Essen-Katernberg this year alone:

• On January 16, 2026, a DB Cargo shunting locomotive collided with a public bus in Hamburg Wilhelmsburg—resulting in one fatality and 10 injuries.

• On March 11, 2026, two Agilis Regio-Shuttle trains collided at Bayreuth station—both train drivers were seriously injured, and there were eight injuries in total.

• On September 2, 2026, a 41-year-old railway worker was fatally injured during track works in the Salzwedel district; a 54-year-old man was seriously injured.

• And on October, 7 a worker was seriously injured by a severe electric shock at Göttingen station. He had come too close to the overhead line and has since been receiving treatment at a specialist clinic.

The railway accident on September 2, in particular, bears similarities to the one in Essen-Katernberg and sheds light on the deadly working conditions: on that Tuesday night at around 11 p.m., a freight train was dragging along an excavator being used for track-laying work and hurled it into two railway workers who were still on the tracks at that late hour.

For years, the WSWS has been documenting the staggering number of serious and fatal workplace incidents on the railways. In 2025 alone, there were at least 12 fatal workplace accidents—including four deaths in just four weeks in the spring and the double fatality at the Cologne-Eifeltor freight yard, when an 83-year-old (!) and a 64-year-old worker were killed by a tipping lifting platform.

Major disasters are occurring across Europe: for example, the Tempi rail crash (Greece) in February 2023, which claimed 47 lives; the horrific crash at Adamuz (Spain) in January 2026, which claimed 46 lives; and, most recently, the Urda rail crash (Spain) on October 28, 2026, which claimed at least 69 lives, just three days after the fatal train incident in Essen-Katernberg.

These disasters are by no means inevitable. Above all, they are not, as governments and the media stereotypically claim, the result of mere “human error.” Rather, they starkly reveal fundamental problems within capitalist society: they are the consequences of the collapse of any safe and reliable infrastructure, caused by the logic of profit, the acceptance of glaring social inequality and governments’ turn towards militarism and war.

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The myth of “human error”: The case of train driver Jonas

A stark example of how the ruling class shifts the blame onto the victims can be seen in a recent decision by the Paderborn Public Prosecutor’s Office: it has closed the investigation into yet another fatal incident, citing “human error” on the part of the victim. In other words: the train driver who was killed was himself responsible and therefore solely to blame for his own death.

This relates to the train crash on September 10, 2023 in Geseke (near Paderborn), in which the young train driver Jonas (32) was killed. He was driving a freight train, coming from the cement works, towards the main Paderborn–Soest line when the braking system failed and the locomotive caught fire. The train derailed, the locomotive jackknifed, and several heavily laden wagons became wedged together. Jonas, who was trapped beneath a tank wagon weighing several tonnes, died at the scene.

Three years later, the Federal Office for Railway Accident Investigation (BEU) submitted its report and the Paderborn Public Prosecutor’s Office closed the investigation. They concluded that the train driver had made “two serious errors.” First, he had been hauling too many wagons full of cement at the same time; second, he had checked the brakes not before setting off, but halfway along the downhill stretch. The authors speculate that his motive was to “save time.” Apart from the train driver, the public prosecutor’s office was unable to establish any “directly causal misconduct.”

The BEU report revealed that the train driver, who worked full-time for DB Regio, was also employed part-time by a temporary employment agency (CK Logistik GmbH), for which he was due to work an almost 11-hour shift (from 9:35 a.m. to 8:15 p.m.) on the day of the accident, a Sunday.

On that very same Sunday, at 8:16 p.m., he was due to start a night shift with DB Regio at a depot 43 kilometres away! No wonder he wanted to “save time,” not to mention the fact that he had neither a Sunday rest period nor any other breaks or rest periods. Unauthorised deviations from the timetable to “save time” were apparently the order of the day, and neither the various rail companies nor any works council members or trade union officials raised the alarm. This is evident from a quoted telephone conversation in which the dispatcher responded to Jonas’s announcement that he would run the cement train just twice instead of four times with a laugh and an assent.

Furthermore, the locomotive deployed was a far too underpowered three-axle machine dating from 1965. The whole affair is capitalist logic in its purest form: a worker is forced into agency work and holding down two jobs due to miserable pay, crammed into completely impossible shift patterns and sent down a steep gradient with an inadequate, 60-year-old locomotive.

While the railway companies that put him in this situation go unpunished, he is posthumously declared to be at fault. Yet Jonas had tried everything humanly possible. As his fellow railway workers wrote on a Facebook page at the time, he was positioned between two carriages to vent the main line and initiate an emergency brake, and he made a phone call to close the line: “Jonas gave his life to bring the train to a halt! Without a moment’s hesitation, he tried to save other lives: he sacrificed himself.”

Independent rank-and-file committees are necessary

From the railway unions EVG and GDL, one hears (if at all) only meagre words of condolence, but nothing about the working conditions they accept. Following the horrific accident in Essen-Katernberg, the GDL published three paragraphs about the incident, which it said it had heard of “with great dismay”: “The railway family mourns together.” Not even that much can be found online from the EVG. In reality, the GDL and EVG share responsibility for the fatal accidents. Time and again, they have accepted the demanded cost-cutting measures, real-wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions, and have systematically sold out the struggle against them.

In order to draw the necessary conclusions from the spate of workplace accidents on the railways, it is essential to break with these bankrupt organisations and build independent rank-and-file committees. The WSWS and the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) propose the establishment of independent bodies, democratically run by the workers themselves, to investigate the accidents, draw the necessary conclusions and ensure these are implemented in practice. Workers know the work process and its dangers best. They must take the investigation of workplace deaths into their own hands and take up the fight against management, the authorities and the trade unions. Only in this way can future fatalities be prevented and the living conditions of railway workers and their families be fundamentally improved.

Both the fatal incidents and the appalling conditions on the railways are a global phenomenon. International cooperation among the working class is essential to wage this struggle jointly across national borders. The WSWS and the IWA-RFC offer their assistance and contacts with like-minded people, while guaranteeing protection for whistleblowers, who can contact us via the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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