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Germany: Train drivers determined to continue their strike for better wages and working conditions

The management of Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German government and the media are pulling out all the stops in their campaign to end the ongoing strike by train drivers. The strikers, for their part, are determined to continue their struggle.

This was confirmed last Friday at two large rallies of the German Train Drivers' Union (GDL) in the cities of Nuremberg and Essen. The strikers left no doubt the drivers are prepared to ensure their demands are met.



Strike meeting in Essen on 3 September 2021 (Photo: WSWS) Caption: Striking train drivers in Essen (Photo: WSWS)

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GDL leader Claus Weselsky was due to speak in Nuremberg, but instead had to attend the Hessian Regional Labour Court, which was ruling on an appeal lodged by Deutsche Bahn aimed at making the strike illegal. In a first judgement last week, the court threw out the motion by DB.

The second judgement on Friday also rejected the injunction against the walkout demanded by the DB executive. The Frankfurt labour court had rejected the initial motion on the grounds that it was not possible in summary proceedings to determine whether or not the strike was pursuing unlawful aims.

The regional labour court also examined the accusation that the train drivers were engaged in an illegal action in support of other rail employees. Deutsche Bahn is intent on dividing the striking train drivers from other groups of workers and thereby grant sole “representation” of drivers to its own company union, the Railway and Transport Workers’ Union (EVG).

Striking railway workers were clear about the management strategy and stressed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that they will not allow themselves to be divided.

At Essen central station, young railway workers, freight train shunters and a maintenance man explained to the WSWS why their demands were more than justified: “We keep the shop running ... When the trucks were barely running during the European lockdown, who was transporting and distributing goods? Exactly: the railways, us! We were the ones putting toilet paper and disinfectant on the shelves.”

Work in freight transport is performed seven days a week and around the clock, “so a higher wage is more than justified.” It is also a myth, they said, that there is no passenger contact in freight. “A locomotive goes through several hands in one day, we work closely with colleagues, including in the workshop.” What they lack above all is recognition, they said.

One driver reported: “I drive tank wagons, for example, with isopropanol and sodium hydroxide solution, which is disinfectant. During the day, and a shift lasts nine and a half hours for me, I drive up to 55 wagons, sometimes 85 during the high point of the

pandemic. I check, shunt and drive out there on my own in my remote-controlled locomotive. That's a responsibility for which we want to be paid accordingly."

Management has not acknowledged their sacrifices, he said. "The ones up there [management] get everything spoon-fed and we are supposed to get nothing?" At the same time, recognition should not be limited to mere applause and warm words. "I have a whole basement full of thank-yous. I want to see something on my pay slip."

A colleague from the workshop reported that he, too, had been busier than normal during the lockdowns. "More journeys, after all, also means more maintenance work and more repairs. I am on shifts and have postponed my holidays." In addition to the long shifts, many workers also have a long commute: "I drive 180 kilometres to work and back every day, and my colleague drives 140 kilometres."

The strike is not only about the wage percentages, they said. "It is also about shift scheduling, in particular, the shifts the company is allowed to assign to you depending on the order situation and demand, and irrespective of one's usual shift plan. The company now plans to double the percentage of such shift changes from 20 percent of annual shifts to 40 percent. This in turn means even less weekends off."

The strikers are also not prepared to accept the attack on the company pension under any circumstances. "We need the company pension. You can't live on a state pension in Germany anymore."

While the train drivers were explaining to our reporters, a passer-by approached the group to support the strikers. "Go through with it!" he urged them. "Don't let them wear you down." He himself works in the public sector, he said, and had long since quit the service trade union, Verdi. "I support you," he continued. "You can strike for five months for all I care."

The willingness of train drivers, railway workers and other employees to fight is why the railway executive is so vehemently against the strike. Millions of workers are frustrated and outraged as shift work and overtime become more and more unbearable, pay is declining while the prospect of unemployment and poverty pensions increases. They are all looking for a way to fight back.

This is why the railway board, backed by the federal government, is attacking the strike so provocatively. Train drivers and rail workers are on the front line representing millions of workers. The railways and the government want to make an example of train drivers and conductors.

After yesterday's court ruling against Deutsche Bahn, the company is examining whether it can sue the GDL for damages for the strikes. This was relayed by a spokeswoman for the railway in Frankfurt yesterday. The government also supported railway management and sees no need to change the recently-introduced contract bargaining unity law, which mandates that companies bargain only with the largest unions among their workforce. In the case of the railroad industry, this is Rail and Transport Workers' Union (EVG), which has signed off on a pay freeze and is crossing the picket line during the strike. Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (SPD) as well as Vice-Chancellor and the SPD's candidate for chancellor in the current election campaign, Olaf Scholz, both said they intended to retain the law.

According to news reports, GDL leader Claus Weselsky said after the ruling in Frankfurt that he was ready to resume negotiations. He said he and the GDL were interested in reaching an agreement.

The Socialist Equality Party's statement on the strike stresses: "The entire history of the labour movement shows that only an indefinite strike can bring the opposing side to its knees. Weselsky, however, categorically rejects such an option." Instead of appealing to the broad mass of workers, Weselsky relies on the right-wing German Civil Service Federation, to which the GDL belongs.

The statement goes on to say: "To lead the struggle against the offensive of DB management and the ruling class, new organisations of struggle must be built that are independent of the unions and their officials in workplaces—action committees controlled by workers and accountable only to them."

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