



Germany: After the strike is before the strike!

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A 48-hour strike on Germany's railways has highlighted several key issues, and not just for railway workers. The strike itself, by the train drivers' union, GDL, was solid after a ballot, in which around 70 percent of GDL members took part, produced a clear vote: 95 percent in favour of the strike. For two days the strike paralysed around 60 percent of regional, and 75 percent of long-distance, passenger traffic. There were also massive cancellations in freight transport, even though management tried to cut losses by switching loads to their own and other trucking companies.

The strike also made clear that the GDL is in the process of changing from a "professional" train drivers' union to an organisation for all railway workers. As well as drivers, other workers in the infrastructure sector, including 6 signal boxes and parts of individual workshops and administrations, joined the strike. The union was also able to increase its membership among train conductors.

Incitement from capital

Not surprisingly, capital and the cabinet, the bourgeois press and all kinds of "experts" branded the GDL strike as an attack on Germany as a business location and a danger to the economy. It was even called a threat to health because of passengers squeezing onto fewer trains. Some are already saying that during a pandemic it would be best not to strike at all.

For once, the CDU leader and candidate for chancellor, Armin Laschet, had a clear position; against the GDL. The strike, he claimed, violated "all rules of proportionality" and the union was "holding millions to ransom". The far-right Alternative for Germany, AfD, showed "understanding" for the GDL, but wanted the strike postponed.

The other main parties, the liberal FPD, the Greens and the Social Democrats, also oppose the strike. Even the Left Party, although it defended the right to strike, could not bring itself to support the strike unconditionally because the GDL leadership is not showing solidarity with the Railway and Transport Union, EVG, which is affiliated to Germany's main union confederation, the DGB.

The railway company itself, Deutsche Bahn, DB, is taking a harsher tone. Its personnel director, Martin Seiler, called the decision to strike "not just an attack on DB but on our country", it was "completely excessive and totally inappropriate". Moreover, the GDL had announced the strike at short notice, so the poor company had been taken by surprise, even though it had presented a great offer!

The offer

That "great offer" was for a gradual wage increase of 3.2 percent, over 40 months, until 30 June 2024. This year there would be zero, on 1 January 2022 there would be a first increase of 1.5 percent and, on 1 March 2023, there would be another 1.7 percent.

A zero increase for 2021 would mean a real wage loss for the whole period in view of rising prices. That the GDL rejected this offer as an affront speaks for, and not against, them. The fact that the EVG accepted a similar offer in exchange for protection against dismissal, at a time when there is actually a staff shortage anyway, is a condemnation of their entire strategy. Not willing to fight, always in tune with the railway board, the EVG bureaucracy has been

selling out DB workers for years. Now it accuses the GDL of aggressively poaching members and opposes their co-workers' industrial action!

Such behaviour amounts to strike-breaking, supporting management against the workers. It is, or should be, a trade union no-go. Whatever else one may think of the GDL, their collective bargaining demands are legitimate. Their right to strike must be defended by all militant trade unionists, no ifs, no buts. Otherwise, any criticism of the GDL, however justified it might be in itself, will degenerate into a pretext for stabbing strikers in the back and taking the side of capital.

And the GDL?

The GDL, or more precisely its executive board, is certainly not a showcase for trade union policy. To this day, it is part of the professional-reactionary Civil Servants' Association, which, despite everything, is still clearly to the right of the DGB. The GDL leadership hardly opposes reactionary, above all racist or sexist, behaviour in its own ranks, it rather tolerates it. Its leader, Claus Weselsky, who has been a CDU member for years, has also attracted attention in the past with anti-disability slogans and opportunism towards the AfD and populism. Moreover, the GDL does not fundamentally reject the ever-increasing competition and privatisation of the railways, at best it just wants them to be structured "fairly", in this, however, it hardly differs from the EVG.

Unlike the bureaucrats in the boardrooms of the DGB unions, who often come from administrative backgrounds or the learned academic professions, Weselsky comes across as the plain speaking representative of the workers who stands up for his people, and he does so with a certain credibility. He does not have to play the train driver, the railwayman. He drove trains himself. Even though he has been an exempt functionary of the GDL for a good three decades, he says what is in the mind of many of his members, he has remained "one of them".

Of course, no one should exaggerate the radicalism of the GDL leadership, it is not as unwilling to compromise as the DB management pretends. The union itself withdrew the original collective bargaining demand, which among other things provided for a pay increase of 4.8 percent and a Corona bonus of 1300 euros. In the last negotiations, it based its demands on the 2021 public service agreement: a 3.2 percent wage increase for a period of 32 months and a one-off Corona bonus of 600 euros, starting in 2021, that is, there should be no zero increase this year. DB rejected these already reduced demands, and the EVG also declared them to be "excessive". After all, it had already concluded a worse contract and feared losing more members to the GDL if the latter is successful.

Why is the fight so fierce?

There are two main reasons why the GDL is fighting so hard. Firstly, the strike is a response to pressure from the rank and file, from its own membership. Those who do not want to accept this simple fact would only need to attend meetings of the strikers, where anger and militancy are immediately obvious, to realise this.

On the other hand, the GDL leadership rightly feared being sidelined by a new law on collective bargaining. This law stipulates that in each company only the union with the largest number of members has the right to conclude a collective agreement and, accordingly, only this union may exercise the right to strike. The law was openly declared necessary by the CDU-SPD coalition government in 2015, shortly after the last nationwide GDL strike, so that small sectoral unions could no longer paralyse the country.

The so-called "unity of collective bargaining" is therefore tantamount to a restriction of the right to strike. This is not changed by the fact that important DGB trade unions, above all the engineering union, IG Metall and the EVG, supported it, even demanded it, because they hoped it would secure their position in central companies and eliminate unwelcome competition. In addition to the coalition partners, the majority of the FDP also voted in favour of the law, while the Greens and the Left Party rejected it.

After several years of delay, this law is now to be applied to the railway. Ironically, the legal situation is complicated by the neoliberal railway reforms and restructuring of the company itself. Because the company has been subdivided into many divisions and sub-companies, there are areas where the GDL does have a majority. In most cases, the EVG is

(still) the majority union, but in some of them the situation is disputed. This means that industrial action for better wages and working conditions not only involves competition between the two unions but is also always on the brink of becoming illegal. In the end it is always the bourgeois courts that decide which union has collective bargaining rights and is thus capable of going on strike.

Therefore, the current industrial dispute is about more than "just" wages, bonuses and working conditions. Behind the conflict, it is quite obvious that the railway board, the government and the employers' associations, supported by the bourgeois press and especially the tabloids like Bild, are using the dispute to attack the GDL's right to strike.

What could be fatal in this situation is that the leadership of the larger union, the EVG, is taking the side of the board. It accuses the GDL of unfair recruitment campaigns and malicious attacks on EVG members, including bullying. Instead of supporting the industrial action, the EVG has even set up a telephone hotline for workers who feel "picked on" by members of another union. The GDL, on the other hand, is fighting for its existence. If it were no longer able to conclude collective agreements and, thus, no longer able to go on strike lawfully, it would be finished as a trade union. Of course, they are now fighting hard, but their existence is at stake.

Attacks on all workplaces

The reactionary character of the law on collective bargaining unity is openly revealed here. An attack on the entire workers' and trade union movement is currently being carried through. If the GDL were to lose, this would ultimately lead to the implementation of collective bargaining unity on the railways and the dismantling of a smaller union that has become more militant in recent years.

Of course, it is highly problematic for the struggle that the DB management and bourgeois politics have so far succeeded in turning the GDL strike and the political conflict into a confrontation within the workforce, effectively dividing it. In recent years, both the EVG bureaucracy and the GDL leadership have actively contributed to this. Both are ultimately only interested in strengthening the position of "their" union, and neither of them shies away from constant demagoguery against the other. They both want more from the trough of "social partnership" and the sinecures of co-determination.

Unlike the EVG leadership, however, the GDL currently finds itself forced by pressure from below and by its precarious situation to resort to strike action in order to assert its interests - and that makes it, whether intentionally or not, an enemy of the state, an economic pest and a spoilsport for holiday travellers.

Strike perspective and GDL leadership

With the industrial action, the GDL executive board has started a confrontation whose overall dimension it can only guess at. Behind the purely collective-bargaining, trade-union dispute over higher pay, lies a larger political dispute. The GDL leadership, however, wants to conduct the struggle as if it were ultimately just a normal round of collective bargaining. They may succeed to a certain extent, as their members can exert real economic pressure. But it is also clear that the GDL leadership hopes not to take the fight too far. Limiting the strike to 48-hours was intended to persuade DB to improve its offer and thus strengthen the GDL as a recognised bargaining partner, at least for the immediate future. To this end, its leadership is certainly prepared to make further concessions. As long as the deal turns out better than that of the EVG and this can be seen by the workers, the GDL leadership can sell a compromise as a hard-won success. Certainly, this tactic can be reinforced by another temporary strike, as Weselsky has announced for next week, if DB does not improve its offer.

However, the tactic has a weakness. What happens if the railway board does not give in, if it seeks confrontation, if it demands that the GDL put all its cards on the table? This is where the weaknesses of purely union tactics become apparent. Since the GDL basically understands the confrontation in purely operational terms, it cares little or nothing about public opinion. In one respect this is a strength in that it is not impressed by the agitation of the bourgeois press and politicians.

But this should not blind us to the enormous weakness of this policy. The GDL leadership doesn't really care what other workers think about their industrial action. There were no leaflets during the strike, or during earlier strikes, no public relations work to address commuters and travellers, to solicit their understanding and solidarity and to counter the lies and half-truths of the tabloids and the so-called quality press.

The GDL leadership also adopts a politically passive attitude towards railway workers who are not members of the GDL, that is, towards EVG members. Of course, the smaller union is happy about every defection. But it does not try at all to address the rank and file members of the EVG and militants who are also fed up with bureaucracy and social partnership, and thus to have an effect on the EVG. For this to happen, the GDL itself would have to pursue a policy aimed at creating fighting unity among all workers, and not just hope that its apparatus proves more attractive than that of the EVG. However, this policy has meant that both bureaucracies have been able to keep their own ranks fairly tightly closed. Many EVGers, even at the grassroots level, hate the GDL and the GDLers hate the EVG. This may help the leaders of the respective unions but, above all, it helps the railway board, which always presents itself as willing to negotiate and enjoys playing the two unions off against each other.

What next?

These restrictions, and the purely trade union character of the GDL leadership's policy, do not, of course, change the fact that all trade unionists, including all EVG members, should support the industrial action! Criticism of Weselsky and Co. is good and important, but this must not become an excuse for not supporting them when they take a step in the right direction. A victory for the GDL would ultimately be one for all railway workers, all wage earners, because it shows that improvements are possible if we really fight.

At the same time, however, we need a politicisation of the industrial action because, sooner or later, it will develop into a political struggle, or else end in a compromise that at best postpones the decisive confrontation. The bull has to be taken by the horns! The solidity of the strike has shown that it can be maintained but it has to be politicised, carried into the ranks of the whole workforce and working class.

This means for all forces of the workers' movement, for the members of the Left Party and the SPD, but also for the "radical" left and the environmental movement, that they have to support this industrial action unreservedly. For the strike to be victorious, for the union to be successful in a political confrontation, we can and must take the initiative and build solidarity committees that educate the public and make it clear that an improvement of the income and working conditions of the workers is also in their interest. In this way, it can become a starting point for a common struggle against wage theft, flexibilisation, privatisation and precarious working conditions.

- Support the GDL strike! Full mobilisation and indefinite strike for the demands - no further retractions and concessions!
- No use of civil servants and other workers as strike breakers!
- Regular strike assemblies for coordination, extension and democratic control of the struggle!
- Build solidarity committees in all unions and all cities! Support these committees through Left Party and SPD branches!
- No to the law on collective bargaining unity and all restrictions on the right to strike!
- Reversal of course in all DGB trade unions and support for the GDL strike! Build a grassroots and solidarity movement to force this!

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