

German rail strike: report from Berlin and Frankfurt-Main

By WSWs reporters
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Suburban trains in Berlin, which normally run every few minutes, were running only every 20-40 minutes due to the strike. Many passengers had adapted themselves to the strike and taken to other forms of transport. The stations were relatively empty. Strike pickets by the drivers' union (Deutsche Lokführer—GDL) were also absent due to the ban on their activities by the Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Railways) management.

At the main east Berlin station, Ostbahnhof members of the GDL were forced to leave their rest room and the entire station area at 5:00 a.m. The train drivers had withdrawn to a small restaurant near the station, which had made a room available for the use of the strikers.

Train drivers were very eager to discuss with the *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team and a number of drivers were already familiar with the WSWs leaflet on the strike and other articles. On the other hand, drivers were very sceptical with regard to the rest of the media. A reporter for the sensationalist daily *Bild Zeitung* was unable to find anyone who would give him an interview and drivers explained that they did not give interviews to this "lying rag."

Andreas von Rappard is 35 years old and has been active as a train driver in the GDL since May 2006. He was previously a member of the trade union Transnet, but felt let down by the organisation. "Transnet is simply a tool of [DB CEO] Mehdorn." He explained. Rappard had got up at 3:00 a.m. and was due to have started work at 5:00 for a shift involving driving through the entire country and ending at 17:47. "I only rarely see my wife and two children," he said.

He stressed that the GDL was not only striking on behalf of train drivers but for railway personnel as a whole—on-board technicians, wagon supervisors, catering personnel, up to and including cleaning staff. The GDL was therefore intending to change its name in the future to the "trade union for train personnel."

It was not the union that was responsible for the splitting of the railway workforce, Rappard stressed. "In reality, we have long since been beaten and divided. Goods traffic runs

under its own organization as Railion, regional traffic as Railway Regio and long-distance transport as DB long-distance. Altogether a total of around 60 private firms were currently active in Deutsche Bahn. With our strike we want to prevent the privatisation of the railways which would then hit those workers involved in profit-yielding areas of the company."

When asked for his opinion on the significance of the French protests for striking train drivers, he explained that he welcomed the strikes across the border. In the future, international cooperation will become even more important. "Over the next few years the European transportation system is due to be opened up to the free market. That means that train crews from all countries will be permitted to drive in Germany under their own conditions. It is even more important that we be successful now. We have already received solidarity greetings from many foreign railway workers."

When asked about the role of the government, Rappard said that he continued to hope that the coalition will intervene in favour of the train drivers. Economic damage would be considerable if the strike continued. In this respect he believed that the strike could be successful if it were continued in a consistent manner. "If the colleagues continue to stand firm then we can take on the combined front of the companies, government and the the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB)."

Wolfgang Mielke is 50 years old and has worked on the railways for 33 years. He is critical of the role of the government. "They described us as blackmailers, as if we were criminals." He hoped, however, that the coalition would back down in face of the strike pressure. "This railway executive committee must be replaced," he said. "If the government really turns on the train drivers, it will face broad resistance. In relation to the increase in executive committee salaries our wage demands are just peanuts."

Frankfurt, Thursday, November 15. Large parts of the railway network had been brought to a halt by the strike. In Hesse, nearly half of all suburban and regional trains failed

to run. An emergency plan had been established for main line and express trains that was operating on a sporadic basis and goods traffic had been hit by strike action since noon on Wednesday.

WSWS reporters visited the strikers in the GDL strike headquarters opposite Frankfurt's main station. The offices, corridors and stairways of the building were full of good-humoured and militant train drivers, who when asked said they were prepared to go on strike for an unlimited period.

Bernd Hauptmann, Monique P. and some colleagues confirmed this. "It is difficult to say how it will continue," Bernd says, "but there is no way we will back down." His colleague adds, "It could well be that it develops into an unlimited strike; that depends on the railway executive committee—whether it makes an offer or not."

The four once again explained what was at stake in the strike: Train drivers earn no more than €1,500-1,600 per month, depending upon Sunday work or nightshifts. "It can be even less, if one has taken a vacation and receives no extra payments," said Monique. Bernd rebuffed rumours in circulation of a higher wage for train drivers: "It is a disgrace when the public are continually told we would get 2,200 euro take home pay; that figure is at most gross pay, and for the highest salary bracket."

For this money train drivers carry out arduous work involving a complex shift system. The work calls for a high degree of responsibility, with drivers taking charge of hundreds of passengers in high-speed trains driving at times at maximum speed in difficult weather conditions.

"The salary is just enough to pay all one's bills," Bernd explains, "but there is nothing left over." He explained that many drivers had come to Frankfurt from the east of the country following the reunification of Germany 17 years ago. Most are forced to commute and maintain a second home—but face the problem of how they can possibly pay for two dwellings. "That is already difficult under conditions where such ordinary purchases as new glasses, or dentures involve auxiliary costs. And the health insurance companies pay less and less."

When asked their opinion about the strikes carried out by French railway workers the strikers responded very positively, and were greatly in favour of pan-European action. When one colleague asserted that the railwaymen in France had their own problems a lively discussion developed over the increasing trend to privatisation, encouraged by the European Union authorities in Brussels.

"In France, privatisation was no longer an issue following the long strike in the nineties," one train driver remarked. "Now, however, everything is coming up again. One should really organize the strikes jointly."

Several of the drivers expressed their view that the planned privatisation contained enormous dangers and was the principal reason for the unyielding and stubborn stance adopted by the DB executive. "With privatisation all that is important is the market value and profits," Monique said. "In order to achieve their ends they want to prevent us obtaining our own contract agreement—whatever the cost. Just consider what this strike now costs: it must reach into the millions. They could have increased our salaries for much less money long ago."

Her colleague Bernd confirmed that the railway executive was being backed by a united front involving economics interests and government parties: "It is not just the DB management but also the employers' associations; and none of the political parties are any better. When I heard leading politicians such as Peter Struck (Social Democratic Party) saying, 'It is important for the DB to remain absolutely firm,' then that is inexplicable. After all they should be on our side."

When the WSWS reporters responded that this was the main reason why workers needed a new party, Bernd replied, "Many have also said the same thing to us. The SPD will not change its right-wing policies even though it receives fewer votes."

Monique then stressed the high level of support for the strikers on the part of the population at large: "It is disgraceful when the media claims we are a small minority. That is not correct. The GDL has 35,000 members, of which 80 percent are train drivers. One can see now that we are not a minority, but in the near future this will become even clearer. We not only have the support of the train drivers, but also the population at large. Many have sympathy for our cause because they know they are in the same situation as us and are glad to see that someone is giving a lead."

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