

German media seeks to whip up public opinion against pilots and train drivers

By Marianne Arens
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Pilots of the Lufthansa subsidiary, German Wings, held a six-hour warning strike last Friday morning, following the collapse of negotiations between the company and the Vereinigung Cockpit (VC) trade union on Thursday. The pilots are defending their early retirement agreement, which the German Lufthansa corporation wants to abolish in stages. Some 164 flights were affected by the strike at airports in Cologne/Bonn, Dusseldorf, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Berlin.

Two days earlier, about 800 train drivers from the German Train Drivers Union (GDL) had gathered for a protest meeting in Fulda. They also declared themselves ready to strike in order to achieve a two-hour reduction in their 40-hour week, as well as a salary increase of 5 percent.

Both pilots and train drivers have every right to be fighting for their legitimate demands, and thus deserve the full support of the working class. They are being fiercely attacked by the two major rail and airway corporations, Bahn AG (German Railways) and German Lufthansa, which have the backing of the government and media, as well as the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), the Rail and Transport Union (EVG) and the Verdi service union. (The EVG is the successor of the Transnet railway union, formerly the Union of German Railway Workers, GdED.)

Lufthansa management wants to reduce personnel costs in order to increase corporate profits and shareholder dividends. It intends to abolish the pensions of 5,400 pilots at the three airlines—Lufthansa, German Wings and Lufthansa Cargo. Flight captains, retiring from the age of 55, previously received pensions of up to 60 percent of their final salaries, but the company plans to gradually increase the retirement age to 61 within the next two years.

The train drivers have also been forced to defend their wages and working conditions. Bahn AG flatly rejected a reduction in the working week, which is urgently needed by employees.

In view of its proposed stock market launch, the company had abolished a huge number of jobs in the 10 years from 2002 to 2012, reducing the workforce from 350,000 to 190,000 employees. Although Bahn AG was eventually not launched on the stock exchange, chronic understaffing has resulted in the continued imposition of overtime working conditions. According to a report in March, railway workers accumulated

nearly 8 million hours overtime in 2013. That was the year when the Mainz central railway station was out of service for weeks due to a shortage of train drivers and other travel service staff.

Personnel director Ulrich Weber said last Saturday that 5 percent more pay and two hours a week less work were “absolutely impossible” demands. A reduction in working hours would not even be discussed, he added. Furthermore, there had to be clarification about which union was representing which group of workers in the company. Until then, Weber was offering a one-off lump sum of €350 to cover a transitional period of six months, and this was only on offer to train drivers.

The media are conducting a vile smear campaign to incite public opinion against the two categories of workers. On Thursday, an article appeared on the Zeit-online web site, headlined “Should train drivers and pilots be allowed to paralyse the country?” It declared: “When railway workers and airline captains go on strike, the whole country suffers. Is this justifiable?” Although the article took the form of a balanced “pros and cons” discussion, the general claim was made that train drivers and pilots have “a monopoly of power,” they had “chosen a profession that gives them access to the country’s operational hubs,” and if they go on strike, they “take hostage transport networks throughout the whole country.” Pilots were “overpaid.” One had the impression that pilots and train drivers were “concerned not with solidarity, but increasing their privileges.”

The *Bild* tabloid newspaper published a guest commentary by Michael Hüther from the Cologne Institute for German Economic Research, stating: “Air and rail traffic are being paralysed by a small group of employees who occupy key positions as train drivers, air traffic controllers or pilots. Unions representing specific occupational branches are exploiting that power.”

Hüther’s Institute for German Economic Research has long been critical of small unions and has called for the introduction of a mandatory uniform tariff, based on that of the union that has the majority membership in a particular company. It also advocates a “unified renunciation of industrial action, as conditioned in the collective agreement of the majority union.”

This aims to stifle any independent action that might be taken by unions in the DGB.

The German government has been trying for several years to create a law that establishes the “principle of a common contract agreement” for all employees within a company. It thereby sides with the employers’ organisations, which allege that competing unions are inflicting damage on the “infrastructure and the reputation of German business”—to quote the Institute for German Economic Research.

The DGB and Verdi also support the introduction of legally sanctioned joint contracts, even though the Federal Labour Court overruled this principle four years ago, because it would violate the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of association.

The EVG railway union, which acts as an extended arm of Bahn AG, used every means available to try to keep the GDL union out of the negotiations. On Wednesday, the EVG announced its own wage demand, which is intentionally 1 percentage point higher than that of the GDL. That is, it is seeking a monthly wage increase of 6 percent, or at least €150. In late June, the parties involved concluded their basic tariff agreement, which in fact amounted to a betrayal of all the other occupational groups by the GDL train drivers and the EVG.

The EVG is an integral part of the Bahn AG management. Half of the supervisory board, the so-called “employees” representatives, are appointed by the EVG, and union boss Alexander Kirchner is the vice chairman. Last year, Kirchner received €61,000 for his work on the board—in addition to his base salary of more than €100,000.

The unions have the same goal as that of the so-called global players, Bahn AG and Lufthansa, which is to achieve maximum company profits at the expense of the employees. They therefore try to head off all labour disputes. Ultimately, however, this applies not only to DGB unions ECG and Verdi, but also the GDL and Cockpit branch unions. They basically have the same perspective. Moreover, their nationalism isolates the employees from the struggles of fellow workers in other countries.

The staff of railway and air traffic companies are increasingly confronted with attacks on their wages and working conditions, as a consequence of privatisations and pan-European and global competition. For example, German federal state governments and local municipalities have for years been placing orders throughout Europe for trains, buses, trams and railway trackage. Budget airlines are gaining ground in the air transport industry. Workers are being systematically forced to shoulder the pressures of this competition.

Both airline pilots and train drivers do extremely responsible and demanding work. A pilot is inevitably exposed to particular stresses, resulting for example from day and night shifts, and time and climate changes. This is why their struggle focuses on the defence of early retirement. The same applies to the train drivers.

Travel safety has also deteriorated as a result of years of

austerity measures and cost cutting, which have led to an increase in breakdowns, near-collisions and actual accidents. In addition, statistics show that cases of suicide occur in Germany every day. Train drivers have to somehow cope with all these difficulties.

The limited nationally-based perspective of the GDL and Cockpit branch unions can do nothing to oppose this global development, as the occasionally bitter labour disputes of recent years have already shown. The GDL’s 2007/2008 labour dispute ended in March 2008, when the GDL shrank from expanding the strike and remained obediently passive during the tariff negotiations. The train drivers, who had also struck, were thereby in the lurch.

The GDL is part of the German Civil Service Federation (DBB), and its chairman Claus Weselsky is not only a member of the DBB board, but also the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Weselsky and the GDL, as well as Cockpit, act as though a nationally based union would be able to defend workers’ interests in the era of global crisis, if only it were a little more militant and less corrupt.

But this is an illusion. In reality, the struggle to defend workers’ rights and achievements immediately raises the question of political perspective. In that respect, the branch unions are in accord with the DGB unions. Both adhere to the capitalist profit system.

Weselsky takes great care to avoid harming the German economy. On Wednesday’s “Morgenmagazin” television programme, he did not want to talk about strikes at all, stressing: “We branch unions act responsibly, when it comes to our right to strike. We try to arrange things so that no strikes are going on during negotiations.”

The truth is that pilots and train drivers have long been unable to defend their social gains, wages and jobs by pursuing a policy of social partnership with their employers. They need new organisations that are independent of the DGB and branch unions. Such a movement must lead workers in a principled struggle against the domination of public transport by the capitalist profit system. And, above all, it must uphold an international socialist perspective.

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