

German train drivers strike in first day

By our correspondents
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A strike by train drivers began in Germany on Wednesday. At 3 p.m., large sections of freight transport came to a halt. From 2 a.m. Wednesday morning, the strike was extended to trams, regional and long-distance passenger trains. The action is due to end at 4 a.m. Monday.

The chairman of the train drivers' union (GDL) Claus Weselsky, stated that strikes could continue beyond this point if the train operator Deutsche Bahn was not prepared to come to an agreement. The strike fund was well capitalised, said the GDL leader.

The union is demanding a modest wage increase of 5 percent and a two-hour reduction of the workweek. But above all, the GDL is fighting for the right to represent its members independently in contract negotiations with the company.

Deutsche Bahn is firmly opposed to this. With the support of the railway and transport union (IVG), which cooperates with management in the tradition of a "yellow union" to impose wage cuts on workers and ban strikes. As a result, the GDL has called upon shunting staff, conductors, catering staff, signals personnel, trainers and instructors to strike.

A WSWS reporting team spoke immediately after the beginning of the strike with commuters and passengers affected by the strike. Many responded sympathetically towards the train drivers but said they were poorly informed. At Berlin's Ostbahnhof, Susanne, a student from Potsdam, spoke about her mistrust for the media. She felt that she had not been given objective information about the negotiations from the media reports. "I don't think it is reasonable that the GDL has been made responsible for the strike, and not the management." Her companion Ron added that the train drivers had no other option but to strike in order to enforce their demands.

Another passenger also declared their solidarity with the strike. "There are not enough strikes in Germany,"

said Paul, who works in the wholesale trade. "Workers have to campaign for their rights. If a group of employees strike and enforce their demands, it will be good for all."

Peter works for Deutsche Bahn in security technology. He is not a member of the GDL, but of the EVG, which is part of the German trade union confederation (DGB). In spite of this, he supports the train drivers' strike. "The colleagues have absolutely no other means to enforce their interests without striking," he said.

"If the state wants everything to be fast and cheap, it must expect strikes," he continued. This did not apply only to the railways. "Tomorrow, it could be industrial workers. Then there will be strikes there. Today, the trains are not moving. The government is to blame. It has privatised everything."

Then he spoke about the key issue in the strike. "If the colleagues in the EVG no longer feel represented by the union they must have the right to change to another union and strike in defence of their interests. The right to strike is a fundamental right. If we lose this right, we will be nothing more than slaves, and the employer will be able to dictate everything to us."

Wolfgang, who works for Deutsche Bahn as a cleaner, also supported the strike. "If the GDL wins, it will be good for all of us," he commented.

At Frankfurt central station, the support for the train drivers' strike was overwhelming. After some hesitation, a young office worker declared his support for the strike, "I heard that they are demanding a reduction in the work week by two hours. I can understand that," he said. "Of course it is a bit awkward, especially if one is dependent on the train. But we will get by for the four days. If the train drivers achieve their demands, it will be entirely correct. Sometimes there is no other way, I understand that. Profit is the first priority. And Deutsche Bahn is not

exactly paying high wages.”

We met Duygu in the smokers’ area in front of the main entrance. She works as a supervisor in the Deutsche Bahn lounge. From her own experience, Duygu knows a thing or two about the overburdening of staff. “Normally we work 50-60 hours per week and urgently need more staff.” She had to give up her position as a train conductor due to burnout before starting her current job. On the trains, she was sometimes compelled to work for 12 hours in a shift. Regular breaks on the train were normally not possible. The whole situation gradually became unbearable, she explained.

She did not believe that cutting the workweek would improve things. Deutsche Bahn would still not hire any new staff, she said. “Work speed-up will then get worse, because the amount of work will not drop,” she said. Moreover, there is already an extreme lack of personnel in her area of work. Along with two fully-trained staff members, there are four apprentices who still need to learn practically everything.

Duygu recently switched from the EVG to the GDL. But so far, this had made no difference, she said. And she earns even less than the train drivers, “For a working week of up to 60 hours, the basic net income is €1100 monthly.” She added, “If there weren’t various top-ups, it would be totally impossible to live on that.”

In the workers’ canteen, we met a group of tram drivers. They read the latest WSWs article on the train drivers’ strike interestedly. “At least you have the correct numbers on the reduction of staff,” one commented. “No one knows the conditions we have to work under, how short-staffed we are and how many overtime hours we have to cram in.” He reported that “Every day, we are between 10 and 20 people short. Because others have to take over, this amounts to a large number of overtime hours.”

Another tram driver remarked sarcastically, “Even without a strike, they manage to bring everything to a halt.” He was referring to a problem with the signals in Frankfurt earlier that day which had stopped traffic on two tram lines. Then he pointed to the main cause of this, “It all goes back to privatisation in 1994. Repairs to the rails have been outsourced for years. Building platforms, maintenance—they are working with the bare minimum of staff everywhere. It isn’t surprising when

at a certain point it can’t go on.”

Niklas works for a small private company, “where we can’t even dream of employee representation.” Asked for his opinion on the train drivers’ strike, he said, “I even took the time to read the statements from both sides, and I must say, I didn’t take very much from that.” In the Deutsche Bahn statement, he had merely found propaganda. But the GDL also had to report more on the concrete conditions confronting train drivers. “Whoever learns that someone responsible for several hundred passengers earns as little as the train drivers do, will better understand the significance of the strike.”

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