

Germany: train drivers' union capitulates

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It is a “compromise with both darkness and light”. These were the words used by the train drivers' union GDL (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokführer) at the end of last week to describe the result of the so-called arbitration procedure, which the union has accepted in the course of its dispute with the German Railways (DB). In fact any such description of the procedure drawn up by the two conservative CDU (Christian Democratic Union) politicians Heiner Geissler and Kurt Biedenkopf is utterly misleading. The fact is that the leadership of the GDL has accepted considerable concessions and is preparing the next stage in the betrayal of its membership.

The extent of the capitulation by the GDL was made clear at a press conference announcing the arbitration result, which featured GDL chairman Manfred Schell sitting alongside, not only the head of personnel for German Railways, Margret Suckale, and the two mediators, but also Norbert Hansen and Klaus Dieter Hommel—the leaders of the two railway worker trade unions Transnet and the GDBA (Gewerkschaft Deutsche Bundesbahnbeamten und Anwarter), which did everything in their power to sabotage the train driver's campaign for increased salaries.

Both of the latter trade unions have functioned during the past few weeks as open strike-breaking organisations. Advisors from Transnet provided support for the legal campaign against the train drivers waged by the DB management, which scoured the land until it found a judge ready to accept their line of argument and ban the train drivers' strike. At the same time the chairman of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), Michael Sommer, publicly condemned the driver's strike.

The fact that the GDL is now sitting alongside Transnet and the GDBA and holding joint negotiations makes clear that there is no real difference between the GDL leadership and these yellow trade unions. The

GDL leadership and Manfred Schell are actively working to undermine the demands made by the union's membership, who voted by a 96 percent majority for strike action in the face of enormous political and legal pressure exerted from the DB management, and leading German business and political circles.

The GDL declared last month it was ready to accept arbitration by Geissler and Biedenkopf and pledged to withhold from taking any further industrial action “during the period of negotiations”. Now a further truce has been agreed to by the union, which will last until September 30. Instead of abiding by the members' demands to press ahead with strike action the GDL leadership is capitulating to the DB executive, the government and the DGB and setting out to undermine the militancy of the train drivers.

The GDL leadership is looking for a satisfactory formula with which to sell out its members. This becomes clear when one examines the previous negotiations. Up to now the GDL has demanded a “separate contract for driving personnel”. This means a contract, which covers all personnel working on a train, i.e. ticket collectors, guards and catering personnel. It has now ditched this demand. In exchange the DB management acknowledged the right of the GDL to represent only train drivers.

It is also already clear that any deal for the train drivers, who are demanding compensation for their complex system of shift work plus “clearly higher remuneration”, will fall far short of their demands. Some weeks ago Transnet drew up a deal for its own members, which explicitly stated that the contract would be rendered invalid should DB management award the GDL its own contract. This piece of blackmail is still on the table despite the fact that Transnet is now taking part in discussions aimed at achieving a “separate contract for driving personnel.”

Behind the scenes Transnet is using the readiness of the GDL leadership to agree a compromise in order to make a so-called “separate contract for driving personnel” the basis for the introduction of an entirely new wage structure for railway workers. In future railway employees will no longer be paid on the basis of a unified wage system, but instead according to a wide range of specific jobs and professions. Wages are to be cut, or made more flexible, for those types of work, which do not require extensive training, or a period of apprenticeship.

In this respect it was important for the DB management and Transnet to separate auxiliary train personnel from train drivers. Even if the latter receive an increase in excess of the 4.5 percent negotiated by Transnet for its members, the train drivers dispute is to be used to introduce a wage system, which results in further salary reductions for the large majority of railway employees.

Five years ago, under pressure from its membership, the GDL quit a joint contract agreement with Transnet and GDBA, which had agreed to a series of compromises that worsened pay and conditions. In November 2002 an auxiliary contract agreement, demanding an additional 18 unpaid shifts by DB-Regio drivers, was withdrawn following opposition from the GDL. Since then train drivers have fought for their own contract while the DB management has refused to cooperate.

When train drivers raised the demand this spring for a 30 percent wage increase and began preparing to take industrial action, they were confronted with a joint front of German big business associations, the government, the judiciary, the media and the DGB, which all backed the DB executive committee. They all recognised that the demands made by the train drivers, backed by widespread support from the German public, expressed profound and wide-spread anger over the extensive cuts to welfare and living standards, which have taken place over a long period of time.

In the face of this pressure, the GDL executive has now retreated even further and is now taking part in negotiations over a new wage system aligned to individual occupational groups and aimed at accelerating the process of wage and welfare cuts.

The capitulation of the GDL leadership underlines the political bankruptcy of a trade union and national

reformist perspective. Train drivers and all workers who are being betrayed by their own leadership are confronted with questions, which require a political response.

The globalisation of the economy has stripped away the basis for social reconciliation in general and the close collaboration between unions and management (Sozialpartnerschaft). Financial trusts operating worldwide and which dominate modern economic life are intent on squeezing the last drop of profit from the working population, in order to satisfy their unquenchable thirst for profit and wealth.

The trade unions and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) have reacted to the bankruptcy of social reformism by firmly lining up with big business in order to defend “German interests”, i.e. the interests of the German banks and major concerns, against the country’s global competitors. The consequences include the growth of militarism, the strengthening of the state apparatus and vicious attacks on workers’ wages and rights.

Instead of placing their hopes in allegedly “neutral” arbitrators, train drivers must mobilize the support of other railway personnel and the working class as a whole. The militant struggle of train drivers, which enjoys considerable public sympathy, must find a new political road based on a socialist strategy that puts the needs of the working population above the profit interests of big business. Production in general and vitally important services such as the railways must be taken out of the hands of the financial aristocracy and be placed at the service of society as a whole.

This can be only achieved on the basis of workers breaking with their old, national organizations and turning to workers in Europe and world-wide in the struggle for a socialist reorganization of society.



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