

German rail workers on the wage settlement: “A huge mess”

Our reporters
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On August 28, the EVG rail union accepted a new contract and declared their industrial action over. The Rail Action Committee reacted to this with the resolution: “The struggle at Deutsche Bahn (DB) has not ended with the strike ballot, it has only just begun.”

In this resolution, the Rail Action Committee calls on workers at all DB companies to report on their working conditions to make public the actual changes that are now being pushed through at the expense of the workforce. We document here reports of three workers employed—a shunting supervisor, wagon master and train dispatcher—at DB. (Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity). All three emphasise the anger and dissatisfaction of their colleagues over acceptance of the conciliation result, and support the establishment of independent rank-and-file action committees for workers to take their interests into their own hands.

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Murat, a shunting supervisor and foreman at DB Cargo, took part in the last meeting of the Action Committee. He said, “What this committee has set out to do is exactly what I have been trying to do all this time on my own.”

On the new contract, he commented, “I, along with many colleagues, voted ‘no’ in the ballot, against the arbitration offer and for strike action. Now we are all leaving the EVG here.” His colleagues had understood that in reality DB dictated everything and that EVG acted “as a middleman”: “EVG is obviously just a service provider, a kind of subcontractor for DB. It is well paid for that; for the EVG officials it is just a money printing machine.”

Murat explained what the colleagues find particularly bitter about the contract: “A few weeks ago, an EVG spokeswoman said on TV that we had staying power and could strike for a year. And what happened? Nothing. There were two short strikes that were considered warning strikes. DB was able to save money, but the workers did not receive strike pay. Those who had holidays or late shifts on those days were lucky, but colleagues who took part in the strike sometimes had to forfeit €300.”

Murat calls his working conditions at the marshalling yard “a disaster,” and that it was “getting worse instead of better.” He described his work: “I dismantle the trains, uncouple them and

shunt them to put them together and get them ready for departure. I usually have 12 trains per shift, which are up to 700 metres long. I walk them all, at least 6 kilometres per shift, and all the time I have to bend down.”

Murat explained why the workload is getting heavier: “With the working conditions and the wages, we can’t get new people. For several years we have only had one career transfer hire here, and he has already left. Actually, there are three of us on shift, but they are just cutting the third colleague.”

Murat was even alone at work for quite a while, “but I refuse to work myself to the bone. Many colleagues were and are sick. At DB, you get gifts if you’ve only been sick one day a year, like me, or if you take on an extra shift. In return you get vouchers from Amazon, Decathlon or Douglas. What am I supposed to do with that? Do I look like I should be exercising? Or am I unkempt? I’ve also received a drinking bottle with a little Swiss flag on it, they must have bought it cheap. It says that the bottle is not suitable for cold drinks or drinks above 40 degrees. It’s still packed and sitting around my place, it’s rubbish.”

The work and the shift system were not conducive to good health even under normal conditions, Murat continued. “But now I was offered 52-hour weeks for three weeks, then a 27-hour week as compensation. That’s nonsense! I have a family, a wife and two children; I hardly see them now. I’ve had lunch shifts from 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. for the last three weeks. I don’t see my kids on those shifts. My son begs me if he ever sees me, ‘Daddy, don’t go to work,’ and my daughter hardly knows me because I’m gone so much.”

Recently, computer tablets have been handed out, apparently in an attempt to save time by means of digitalisation. “Supposedly, we can then already enter everything outside at work. Then we wouldn’t need computers any more and probably soon we wouldn’t need offices. But you can’t use tablets in the rain. There are protective covers for them, but if it rains a bit harder, they fill up with water. It’s a disaster.”

“For this job I get €2,400 to €2,500 net a month,” Murat said. He had once worked in a DIY store doing early and late shifts. “I earned more there than here at DB. I had a little money saved, and now I have to use it to pay my bills. That’s why some of our colleagues voted for the contract in the

ballot—because they urgently needed the €2,850 inflation compensation bonus. The EVG cleverly arranged that.”

Murat is happy not to be alone any more and is now trying to build an action committee together with his colleagues.

Lars, a wagon foreman at DB Cargo and (still) shop steward of the EVG, had only read the WSWS article on the new contract on the morning of the interview. “It spoke from my soul,” said Lars. “The workers are being divided. A few get more money, but the others can see where they stay.”

As a shop steward, Lars knows many colleagues who are deeply disappointed by the settlement. “The arbitration result does not match the collective bargaining demands at all. After all, it was not acceptable that such an important agreement was accepted with 25 percent of the [eligible] votes, while 75 percent were needed for a strike. For him, the whole thing was “a huge mess.”

Lars added, “We were already left alone during the pandemic. We kept everything going even though many colleagues were infected. One of them was absent for over a year because he had had severe breathing problems since his infection. The rules were not respected. We were simply told that we were not allowed to be in the control room with more than three people. Yet there are five of us in our group. There were no coronavirus measures for us. DB and the union didn’t care.”

Lars calculated that a wagon foreman at DB earns around €800 euros less than the German average. “Yet we work day and night shifts, even on Saturdays, Sundays or public holidays. We are always at work, but not with our family.”

A wagon master, Lars explained, checks the freight wagons for technical defects. “We are responsible for everything and practically always have one foot in the slammer. At the same time, everything has been running pretty chaotically at DB for a long time: there is a lack of staff everywhere, so disruptions easily occur.”

The railways are highly integrated across Europe, and disruptions in other countries would have an immediate impact on the entire network. Lars reports that in mid-August an SBB (Swiss rail) train derailed at the Gotthard tunnel, which affected operations for days. “That also had an impact on us and is still having an effect,” said Lars. “In fact, a lot more is happening now than before. I’m really worried.”

Wolfgang is a train dispatcher and is thinking about “compiling a history: when and how rail workers have been cheated in recent years. The Hansen case was certainly particularly striking.”

This refers to Norbert Hansen (Social Democrat, SPD), the chairman of the EVG predecessor union Transnet until 2008, who was responsible for numerous weak collective agreements. Hansen initially sat on the supervisory board of Deutsche Bahn until he rose to become its head of human resources. According to Wolfgang, this was an example of “the employer taking his ‘mortal enemy,’ the head of the union, on his side. For me, that

was treason at the time.”

The employees, on the other hand, were always expected to forgo wages, he said. “That already started with the East-West adjustment (after German reunification in 1991). But why do I as an employee have to voluntarily give up my wages? It was the employers’ problem.”

Wage cuts were imposed twice later. Wolfgang recalled that the EVG had negotiated wage cuts as compensation for a reduction in working hours. “I think it was about the 38-hour week. We kind of understood that at the time—but then what! Two years later it was suddenly said: now we will work 39 hours again; just like that.” These three cases alone would have brought the workers a 3 percent drop in wages.

Wolfgang went on to report DB “solves” the problems of train dispatchers—not by hiring and training colleagues, but by imposing additional controls whereby the train dispatchers, not the company, are to be monitored more closely. “We are controlled like no other professional group in the world,” he said.

Up to now, he said, his colleagues have already been inspected many times, “by the district manager, who questions us, then possibly by federal rail inspectors, by railway managers, and by employees of the DB network agency. And now there is a new idea: In future, countless inspectors will be employed whose sole task is to inspect the train dispatchers. And these employees will of course have to perform, in other words they will keep records of their colleagues, they will look for mistakes. It’s like a department store detective.”

Wolfgang described what this looks like in practice: “The controller stands in the room, deeply relaxed, and observes the dispatcher, who may just have to carry out his train journeys under full load—that’s unbearable! DB is putting an entire profession under general suspicion.”

In addition, the workload of the train dispatchers has increased dramatically. “We are literally dying of train traffic. A dispatcher sometimes works up to 12 hours without a break, he often doesn’t even have time to go to the toilet for hours!” He added, “We usually work at night from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. And we have to eat while we work, which means in case of a breakdown—we don’t eat at all!”

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