

Job cuts at Deutsche Bahn: Rail workers report short-staffing and work-related stress

Our reporters
15 August 2024

The CEO of national rail operator Deutsche Bahn has announced that a further 30,000 jobs will be cut. The plan is supported by the GDL and EVG unions. Rail workers in the administrative departments have told the rank-and-file Rail Action Committee that they are already suffering from staff shortages and work-related stress.

In Berlin, Stuttgart, Duisburg and Frankfurt am Main, members of the action committee have spoken to workers in the administration of Deutsche Bahn (DB). This is the area where the axe is to strike first. A total of 30,000 full-time jobs are to be cut at Deutsche Bahn in five years, as CEO Richard Lutz announced at the July 25 press conference.

The massive cuts have the support of the EVG and GDL rail unions. The train drivers' union GDL has expressly agreed to the job cuts "if they take place in administration and not in the direct [rail] area." The EVG, the in-house company union, is more reserved in its comments, but writes that it "fundamentally" supports "DB's efforts to scrutinise and question processes and structures within the company," as long as the "personnel adjustments ... are planned and implemented in a socially responsible manner." In other words, the EVG will actively participate in the destruction of jobs at Deutsche Bahn.

Both the EVG and GDL have their top representatives on the DB supervisory and are of course familiar with the corresponding strategy paper containing the detailed cuts plans. However, they are keeping it carefully secret from the workforce, trying to keep quiet so as not to cause unrest.

In all four cities where we spoke to rail workers, many reported that union representatives and works council reps were playing down the issue and keeping quiet. "They don't tell us what's going on," said a travel information worker in Frankfurt. And a technician said, "EVG and GDL don't want the workforce to discuss it."

In the statement calling on workers to "defend jobs and working conditions against the government, Deutsche Bahn, the GDL and EVG apparatus," which was distributed widely, the Rail Action Committee describes the plans for job cuts as a "frontal attack on all Deutsche Bahn workers," calls on those working in administration to join its fight to defend jobs, and states: "We will not be divided."

Practically all rail workers took a flyer, and many said it was

important someone was taking the initiative against job cuts. However, the brief conversations also made it clear that no official body—neither management, works council or trade union—is informing the workforce about the plans in concrete terms. Some of them were still unaware of the sword of Damocles hanging over them.

Time and again, they reported on the staff shortages that already prevail in various departments: "We need to hire more people!" or "We are desperately looking for people," said many.

"Vacancies have not been filled for a long time," said an IT technician in Frankfurt am Main. "This leads to staff having to work longer hours and overtime, and it has consequences." Near Frankfurt's main railway station, there are numerous DB offices, including DB-Vehicle Maintenance, DB-Systel (IT) and DB-InfraGo (infrastructure), as well as administrative and training facilities.

One worker said: "We are the people who create the timetables. We really need to hire people urgently." If one person is on holiday and another is sick, then chaos is inevitable. A maintenance worker confirmed that the staff cuts have direct consequences: "If we can't keep up, then the wagons are not operational: then trains are cancelled."

In Duisburg, too, staff working at the DB Netz operations centre reported a significant shortage of personnel. This is where the rail service providers control and plan all freight and passenger traffic in North Rhine-Westphalia and beyond. Almost all departments and areas are understaffed, as the workers reported. They often have to work overtime and even sacrifice their days off.

At the same time, several reported that a general recruitment freeze was already in place, and others pointed to preparations for job cuts. In Stuttgart, an administrative worker reported anger and uncertainty in his company. There was a tense atmosphere; he said: "Everyone is wondering who is on the list now."

In Berlin, a young engineer at the S-Bahn Nordbahnhof local rail depot reported that her contract as a Deutsche Bahn trainee expired at the end of August. This was after she had worked for the company for two years for €1,000 a month. "The contract will not be extended," she said, adding that she would not be

hired permanently either. She pointed out angrily that the same board of directors that is now imposing a hiring freeze is itself cashing in bonuses worth millions. In fact, at the end of 2023, the DB board of directors had received almost €5 million in bonuses, with CEO Lutz alone receiving more than €1.2 million.

Numerous workers pointed out to us that jobs would be destroyed by the use of AI. “Many of our colleagues are already afraid of this,” said the worker, who creates timetables in Frankfurt. An administrative worker in Berlin also reported attempts to carry out planning processes increasingly using AI. She said, “But the previous attempts don’t work at all.”

In the support services sector, jobs are already being cut. A cleaner in Stuttgart said she and one other person have to do all the cleaning, coffee-making, etc., on four floors, which previously employed three people. The third colleague had been taken off her team.

In Frankfurt, an older worker who had been with the railways for 43 years and had worked in railway operations for 25 years told us, “80 percent of the in-house service jobs are being outsourced to subcontractors, as was reported at a works meeting. We already have temporary workers, and that is really exploitation. They get less pay, no holiday pay, no Christmas bonus, no travel discount. That’s not right!”

The same worker confirmed that a recruitment freeze was already in place: “Young people who apply to DB are being turned away. They are putting pressure on older workers to retire early.”

Some EVG members and works council reps also criticised the plans to cut jobs and expressed dissatisfaction with the union. In Stuttgart, a works council member said that she did not agree with the fact that the management, with the consent of the union representatives on the supervisory board, was cashing in millions. In Berlin, a female rail worker said that, unlike the EVG, the GDL was much more militant. However, she was not aware of how the GDL was agitating against the “dead wood” supposedly in the administration, and that GDL leader Weselsky had founded a temporary employment agency for train drivers.

The job cuts in the administration are just the beginning. The planned 30,000 job cuts also target workers on the tracks and in the stations. The planned massive staff cuts have also already begun at DB Cargo, where up to 1,800 job cuts are currently planned.

And at Duisburg Central Station, the train manager of an ICE (Inter City Express) reported how she was responsible for an entire ICE with only one other train attendant. If Deutsche Bahn had its way, this would become the norm, she said. In a fully occupied ICE with 900 passengers, just two train attendants would have to manage the entire operation.

Many railway workers welcome the initiative of the Rail Action Committee to overcome the divisions that have been artificially created between the “productive” area and the

administration. In Frankfurt, the travel information centre worker told us, “I think it’s bad when you say that one part of the company is stealing jobs from the other.”

A technician working on future railway projects told us, “It’s right that you want to overcome the divisions. Every job, no matter where, must be defended because everyone is important in their place. The railways are a large complex.” On Facebook, one worker wrote, “Back then, railway workers, no matter what department, were a unit. Today it seems to me as if we were opponents.”

In Frankfurt, a young man who is training to become an operations manager said it was “an outrage to systematically cut jobs in times of a shortage of skilled workers.” It was well known that DB had been making savings in the wrong places for decades: “Even during [German] reunification and then in 1994, when DB was privatised, that was wrong. Critical infrastructure belongs in state hands,” he said. “The government is standing tall and saying: We want to turn transport around and have fewer autos to protect the climate—and now the railways are being cut back once again.” He promised to study the positions of the Action Committee on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Rail Action Committee is committed to defending every job on principle. It is demanding:

- Instead of cutting jobs, 30,000 new workers must be hired. To achieve this, employees at all railway companies, whether on the tracks, in freight, in technology or administration, must unite to be able to act independently of the EVG and GDL.

- The rights and needs of workers, including passengers, are more important than the profit interests of the government and investors, shareholders and speculators.

- Stop all military transport by rail! No weapons and ammunition for the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, or for the genocide in Gaza.

- International unity of all railway workers. Stop the privatisation of state railways and any critical infrastructure.

Get in touch with us to help build the Action Committee and contact us via WhatsApp at +49-163-337 8340 or register using the form below!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact