

Work accidents at Germany's national rail operator Deutsche Bahn: "We don't know how many there are"

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Time and again, serious, life-threatening and even fatal accidents occur on the tracks of national rail operator Deutsche Bahn. The so-called "general modernisation" of the railways, which is more of a "general destruction," is making the situation worse by cutting 30,000 jobs and dismantling important infrastructure.

A short film on broadcaster ZDF's *Frontal* investigative programme recently highlighted two fatal work accidents in September 2023 for which management has still not provided an explanation or taken responsibility. ZDF has shown the short report "Death on the tracks. Work-related accidents on the railways" by Tonja Pölitz on both *Frontal* and *Panorama*, and it is now also available to view on YouTube.

On 8 September 2023, 19-year-old railway apprentice Simon Hedemann was killed in Hannover-Linden. He was still in training to become an electronics engineer. He was hit by a freight train at the Fischerhof signal box. His parents, who are interviewed in the film, confirm that even today, a year after Simon's death, there is still no official explanation from Deutsche Bahn.

Just three days later, on 11 September 2023, points mechanic Ali Ceyhan (33) was hit by a moving train at the Trimborner Strasse S-Bahn station in Cologne. He suffered such severe head injuries that he died a few days later.

The film gives the bereaved a voice: in Ali Ceyhan's case, his partner Katharina Duarte, who is still trying to get to the bottom of what happened. The track bed where Ali was killed is shown: It is a narrow strip between two tracks that should have been cordoned off during repairs. But it was not. Why not? Deutsche Bahn has yet to provide an answer to this question.

The film makes clear that this is not an isolated incident. Time and again, and with increasing frequency, mandatory track closures are not carried out, workflow steps are shortened under pressure, and train drivers receive insufficient information about construction sites on their routes.

In the film, several railway employees confirm this, some anonymously. One worker explains that both Deutsche Bahn and the regulatory authorities are well aware that track construction crews often start work without the line being closed: "Of course! And then you blame the accident on human error, on the people involved in the accident, and hope that the public prosecutor's office only prosecutes the low-level employees, and not the system above."

A train driver who describes the risky situations he has experienced also confirms, "If I extrapolate, it happens three to four times a day that people are exposed to a safety risk."

And so fatal accidents are becoming more and more common. On the railways in Germany, this was the case at least twelve times between January 2023 and January 2024:

- **16 January 2023, Parsberg:** on the track between Nuremberg and Regensburg, a locomotive strikes two workers clearing the track; one is killed and his colleague is seriously injured.
- **3 February 2023, Bebra (East Hessen):** A shunter is hit and killed by a rolling railway wagon.
- **23 February 2023, Bremerhaven:** An excavator driver (56) is fatally injured while working at night on a railway underpass.
- **4 May 2023, Hürth near Cologne:** An Intercity train strikes two young workers who are carrying out track tamping in connection with laying cables. Both are killed on the spot. Five other colleagues are able to jump aside at the last moment. Deutsche Bahn initially publishes a tweet about "unauthorised persons on the line," which it has to withdraw following protests.
- **14 June 2023, Stade:** A Deutsche Bahn employee (28) is hit and killed by a Hamburg-Cuxhaven regional train while pruning vegetation next to the track. His two colleagues, including his brother, manage to save themselves.
- **21 August 2023, Hannover-Nordstedt:** A construction worker (34) is hit and killed by an S-Bahn train.
- **8 September 2023, Hannover-Linden:** 19-year-old apprentice Simon Hedemann is killed while installing control and safety technology; the exact circumstances are still unknown.
- **10 September 2023, near Paderborn:** train driver Jonas (32) dies when his freight train, coming from the cement plant, derails, comes to a stop and gets stuck. Jonas, who was still trying to apply the emergency brake, is crushed by the tank wagons, which weigh several tonnes.
- **11 September 2023, Cologne-Trimbornerstrasse:** points mechanic Ali Ceyhan (33) is hit by a train and succumbs to his injuries three days later. The exact circumstances have still not been revealed by Deutsche Bahn to this day.
- **19 January 2024, near Koblenz am Rhein:** a 39-year-old worker for a track construction company is hit and fatally injured by a regional train.
- **At the beginning of 2023,** Deutsche Bahn recorded at least one other fatal accident at work, without providing any further details.
- Any list is bound to be incomplete, as there is no authority that registers all accidents. Many are not even reported. The *Frontal* report also addresses this. "We don't know how many people die at work," confirms Wolfhard Kohte, a retired labour lawyer, in the film.

As for the list of fatal accidents at work last year, Deutsche Bahn (DB) only feels responsible for four of them! Most of those killed were travelling on behalf of DB, but were employed by external companies or by another, privatised, rail company. “There are first, second and third class employees,” Kohte comments sarcastically.

An accident on 4 May 2023 near Cologne, in which two track construction workers lost their lives, does not appear in any official list. Neither Deutsche Bahn, nor the Federal Railway Authority (EBA) nor the Federal Office for Railway Accident Investigations (BEU) feel responsible for it.

In the film, the Federal Railway Authority is confronted with the question of why it has still not opened an investigation into the accidental death of Simon Hedemann—a Deutsche Bahn trainee—almost a year later! The authority states that it has “no duty to conduct an in-depth investigation of occupational accidents.”

Simon Hedemann’s parents are left stunned by this response. They have been waiting for answers for a year, and they ask: “What has to happen for them to investigate?” For them, it is a huge disappointment “that no one at Deutsche Bahn is interested in properly investigating this.”

As for the federal government, the owner of Deutsche Bahn, it deals with the issue pitilessly. This becomes apparent shortly before the end of the film. Federal Transport Minister Volker Wissing (Liberal Democratic Party, FDP) is confronted with the fact that his ministry does not even know how many people die on the tracks. The minister rejects any responsibility. “The investigating authorities are responsible for investigating these things,” he replies, unmoved. “We have no evidence from the ministry that there have been any failures.”

The well-researched film is a harrowing record. Nevertheless, it only scratches the surface, according to several railway workers from the Rail Action Committee who have seen it. The real situation is far worse.

The rank-and-file Rail Action Committee was formed in August 2023. Railway workers, train drivers and other rail employees, supported by the WSWS and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP), began to organise independently of the authorities and trade unions, which are in the pocket of big business, in order to better inform their colleagues and “break the dictatorship” of the EVG and GDL union apparatus.

On 4 September 2023, the Action Committee was confronted with the fact that one of its members, a railway worker for DB Netz maintenance, had been seriously injured while repairing an overhead line. The committee began to conduct its own research and collected all relevant information on the causes of accidents in railway operations. Tonja Pölit, the author of the film “Tod am Gleis” (“Death on the Tracks”), draws partly on this research by the Action Committee.

Rail workers who watched the film expressed their solidarity with those affected. A rail worker from Saxony, who works on clearing trackside vegetation and has been at DB for 15 years, expressed the hope that we “will use this to push for change: for the bereaved and also for colleagues who are still on the job and still want to work.”

He continued: “The EBA can be abolished, nothing better will come of it. They always come to check and threaten with fines or order them, but they never have solutions. Everything is decided and judged bureaucratically according to the file. The practitioners are never asked.”

He described his experience as a trackside worker: “The safety plans, e.g., vegetation maintenance on line XY, from then to then are

registered with the office responsible for railway operations BzS, which then draws up the safety plan ... Actually, there should be UV closures [route closures], but that is only possible for large construction sites and rarely at short notice.” One problem is that the dispatcher is often 200 km away: “So he doesn’t know what it looks like on the ground. There used to be a signalman nearby, but that was mostly a long time ago.”

In principle, they are often not supposed to go outside, but work is urgent, “so you do it anyway. In the past, there was a barrier post with a multi-tone signal horn, but that is no longer wanted. According to physics, this would no longer be heard because of the frequency of the old devices. Because “what cannot be must not be.” But newer ones can sometimes be even harder to hear than the old horns. This repeatedly causes dangerous situations.”

In other words, for the men doing the work on the track, their job has become a kind of suicide mission. They know in advance that no one is ensuring their safety, that the line is not closed and that no one is warning them of approaching trains in a proper manner. The worker continued: “One of our colleagues from Eastern Europe also died last year. I don’t know if he even understood what his job was.”

His conclusion: “In the end, everything is carried out on the backs of the workers. The constant new safety instructions are difficult to implement. But we still go out and work, and then it is said that the worker did not follow the safety regulations. That was only partially addressed in the ZDF report.”

A railway worker from DB Cargo said, “It’s just a short film, and in my opinion it doesn’t do the problems justice. We’re dealing with a lot more than that, and everything would have to change fundamentally!”

He described the consequences that the new round of cutbacks has already had at DB Cargo. Entire shifts were being cancelled and colleagues who had resigned were no longer being replaced. “Many are afraid for the future and fear that Cargo will be closed altogether,” he said. “There is already talk of a social plan [closure programme]. For those who have stayed, this intensifies the stress every day.”

Dangerous situations and near-misses are systematically covered up. Just this week, there was another serious accident while maneuvering a locomotive: on Tuesday, 3 September, a 56-year-old train driver in Wörth an der Isar was trapped between his locomotive and a truck that collided with the train. The train driver’s legs were so badly injured that a helicopter had to take him to the nearest hospital.

The government’s austerity plans as a result of its pro-war policies and decades of cutbacks at Deutsche Bahn are costing lives. Write to us if you have information for your fellow rail workers and if you can participate in building the Rail Action Committee! Write to us on Whatsapp, +49-163-337-8340 and register using the form below!



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