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Germany

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Train drivers' strike over wages and hours

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**The national congress of the co-governing Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) made headlines last week with an alleged shift to the left by this former traditional workers' party.**

At the same time, one opinion poll after another confirms that the vast majority of the population supports important left-wing demands, like no to the privatisation of the railways, no to the increase in the age of retirement, no to low wages, yes to a minimum wage and yes to bringing back German troops from Afghanistan. And on the day the SPD congress started, train drivers struck for 30 hours, demanding higher wages and a one hour cut in working time in the longest train drivers' warning strike ever in post-war Germany.

Economic growth in Germany has brought down unemployment, to a certain extent, but is not felt in the pockets of the majority of the working class. Many of the newly created jobs are insecure part-time jobs or jobs with limited contracts. The fall in real wages has not been stopped as prices for basic foods and energy are going up. While metal workers and others achieved wage increases in collective bargaining negotiations, which are somewhat higher than in recent years, they are faced with wage reductions through other means at the same time. Furthermore, 40% of workers are not covered by collective bargain-

ing agreements. Just this week, there were reports in the news of building workers receiving 2.84 euro per hour. Scandals like this, and the growth of the low-wage sector, make the demand for a legal minimum wage very popular. This demand is put forward by the trade unions, the newly formed Left Party and also the SPD (although they demand a relatively low level) but is blocked in the Grand Coalition by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

## Left Party expresses mass anger

The experience of the implementation of neo-liberal policies over many years has changed mass consciousness. During last summer, an opinion poll was widely discussed which revealed that the majority of the population and of the supporters of all major parties actually support left-wing policies, such as a minimum wage, no to privatisation etc.

Even without mass protest movements, this mood created an enormous pressure on the established political parties because, for the first time in years, this mood finds a political expression in the newly formed Left Party. This party is a contradictory phenomena: the result of a fusion of the ex-Stalinist PDS and the new formation WASG (see previous reports on

socialistworld.net). The Left Party stands at 13 percent in opinion polls, at the moment. While the party participates in making social cuts and privatisations, as part of many local and regional governments in East Germany, nationally, it is seen as a left-wing opposition party expressing the basic interests of working people and unemployed.

The Left Party's main leader, Oskar Lafontaine, calls for "freedom through socialism" and for the right to hold a general strike (which does not exist in Germany). This has created growing interest in the party amongst sections of the working class and especially amongst activists in the trade unions and social movements. But because of its current policy in East Germany, Lafontaine's previous career as a SPD former leader, and the former PDS's past role as the ruling party in the old Stalinist East Germany, there also exists an element of scepticism towards the Left Party, which could only be broken on the basis of bold socialist policies and campaigns. This is what SAV (Sozialistische Alternativ – the CWI in Germany) members fight for inside the party in west Germany, where there is some support for such demands in the party.

## Move to the left of SPD

In 2003, the SPD-Green coalition government, under Chancellor Schröder, introduced the notorious Agenda 2010 and so-called Hartz laws – draconic neo-liberal attacks on the social security system. Mass movements in 2003 and 2004, which saw trade union mobilisations of

half a million, and weekly demonstrations of tens of thousands, were not able to make the government withdraw these measures because the trade union leaderships were not prepared to wage a real battle involving strike action. But out of these movements grew the WASG, which led to the formation of the new Left Party.

The 2005 general election result was shaped by this mass rejection of neo-liberalism. Both the social democrats (SPD) and the Christian democrats (CDU) lost votes. The SPD lost support because it had implemented the neo-liberal package 'Agenda 2010' and the CDU because it promised even more neo-liberal policies. The current ruling 'Grand Coalition' is really a coalition of election losers. The majority of German people remain opposed to the government policy of social cuts, despite the establishment parties trying to present the current economic growth as a result of the Agenda 2010.

The SPD - confronted with the coalition partner, the CDU, on one side, and the growing Left Party, on the other side - fell in opinion polls and its long term crisis intensified. The SPD leadership reacted with an attempt to put on a more 'social face', by demanding a minimum wage and certain minimal corrections in the Agenda 2010 legislation. Kurt Beck, party chairman, proposed a lengthening of the period in which newly unemployed workers receive the so-called 'Unemployment Benefit I' (which is about 60 % of a worker's last wage and then is replaced by a minimum benefit of about 350 euros, plus rent per month). This proposal led to an open conflict inside the party leadership, with the SPD ministers in the Grand Coalition

opposing it. But, finally, the party congress voted in favour of this proposal hoping this could stop the erosion of support for the party. Significantly, over 80 % support this step in opinion polls, but only 10% think the SPD could solve the country's problems and, generally, the party remains very low in opinion polls.

The SPD also decided on a new party programme, in which it underlines its support for "democratic socialism". This is not a sudden anti-capitalist turn; for over 90 years, the SPD leaders supported and defended capitalism. This was the term used by social democracy for decades to give a "socialist" favour to its Keynesian model of a "social market economy" based on social partnership within capitalism. In reality, the party leadership long ago turned its back on this Keynesian model, becoming a proponent of neo-liberalism (hence its continued support for Agenda 2010). The decisions of the SPD congress are an attempt to throw dust into the eyes of workers and trade unionists and do not represent a real change in its course. But it does reflect the mood amongst the working class and the growing pressure on the SPD, expressed through the new Left Party.

### Tasks for the Left

Unfortunately, this wavering by the SPD is not used by the trade union tops or the Left Party to start a campaign for the complete withdrawal of Agenda 2010, limiting themselves to calls for modifications. Faced with this, the SAV (German section of the CWI) started a campaign "Agenda 2010 must go – completely!" demanding

an offensive from the trade unions, including strike action, and a mass campaign by the Left Party in support of this demand. The SAV also calls on rank and file activists and trade union bodies to call a national action conference to debate and prepare steps for a serious struggle, including a national demonstration organised from below.

### Train drivers' dispute

At the same time, a very important industrial battle has developed. The train drivers are demanding a large wage increase (they demand a basic minimum wage of 2.500 euros before tax and social benefit payments) and a one-hour cut in their working week. This comes after years of cuts in real wages and worsening of working conditions, especially for train drivers. The leadership of 'Transnet', the main trade union in the railway company and which is part of the trade union federation (DGB), has, for years, been complicit in implementing attacks on the workforce and in supporting the plans for the privatisation of the railways. This led a majority of train drivers to join the smaller train drivers' union, GDL, which is outside the DGB (the majority of rail workers remain in the DGB union).

While Transnet and another small union agreed, in spring, this year, to a new wage contract, with a 4.5% wage increase, the GDL demands a separate contract for train drivers and higher wage increases. An intense dispute developed, in which strikes were banned by capitalist courts several times but the latest court ruling, on 3 November, made strikes legal on all

trains – short and long distance passenger and commercial goods trains. Up until then, the GDL organised several strikes concerning short-distance commuter trains, with the longest strike lasting 30 hours. Despite these commuter train stoppages, 66 % of the population say that they “understand” the train drivers’ strike. This figure even grew over the last weeks!

This dispute sparked a controversy in the trade unions and amongst the left about how to relate to the strike and the GDL. While almost everybody on the left and in the unions agrees to oppose the court rulings against the right to strike, the tops of the other trade unions and even members of the small Communist party (DKP) and the Left Party argue that the GDL is “splitting” the workforce and tries to win privileges which undermines the capacity to fight of all railway employees.

SAV argues that the train drivers are conducting a legitimate struggle in which they have to be supported unconditionally. We explain that it is the responsibility of the right wing leadership of Transnet that many train drivers have joined the GDL. We argue that a success of the train drivers could be used by the other workers to also demand higher wages and re-join the struggle. The GDL leadership should make appeals to other sectors of the railway workforce to fight together but it cannot be criticised for fighting in the interest of its members. The GDL demands are not at the expense of other rail workers. On the contrary, if the GDL scores a victory they will show to fellow rail workers, and other trade unionists, determined struggle can succeed.

We explain that Marxists stand for the unity of the working class in struggle but that this does not necessarily and automatically mean unity in one organisation – be it involve trade unions or political parties. The DGB leaders’ attacks on the GDL in the name of “unity” are hypocritical, as the DGB leaders do not lead united struggles of the working class. Each situation has to be looked at concretely. In Deutsche Bahn (the German railway company), the Transnet leaders have been united with the management against the GDL, reflecting the fact that the Transnet leader, Norbert Hansen, is simultaneously deputy chair of Deutsche Bahn’s supervisory board. As the Transnet bureaucracy has held back struggles for so many years it is an important step forward that the train drivers found a way to fight against management. This could lay the basis for united struggles of all rail workers in the future, if different trade unions formed a united front. But supporting the GDL’s struggle does not mean abandoning other rail workers or giving any backing to employers’ “divide and rule” attempts to split workers, as is currently happening amongst some workers in the new private post companies.

SAV calls on the Left party and all trade unions to support the train drivers’ strike and organise solidarity action.

**No to the privatisation of the railways!**

At the same time, the planned privatisation of Deutsche Bahn is now in question.

The SPD congress voted in favour of a model of privatisation through “people’s

shares without voting rights” in response to the mass mood against a privatisation (including against selling parts of Deutsche Bahn through selling shares to big investors and corporations). The conservative CDU rejects the SPD’s model and it is possible that the whole project will have to be cancelled.

Obviously, the train drivers’ strikes are an additional factor which puts pressure on the privatisation plans, despite the fact that the GDL does not stand against privatisation, in principle. But a railway company having to deal with a self-confident and strong train drivers’ union is less attractive for private investors than one with an uncombative and compromising workforce and union. This is one reason why, so far, the railway management has not been prepared to give in to the GDL’s demand for a separate contract for train drivers only.

It is not ruled out that a compromise can be found, as the GDL has now the legal opportunity to escalate the struggle. But it is also not ruled out that the bosses are prepared to escalate the struggle, in the hope they can isolate the train drivers from other workers. This could be a misjudgement, however, as sympathy for the strike is growing, and many workers would want their trade unions to act in a similar way to the GDL.

SAV is engaged in solidarity work with the train drivers. Our members in many cities help on the picket lines (although, unfortunately, in many cases, the GDL does not organise picket lines). In Berlin, we organised a protest rally, together with GDL members and others, at which 70 people

protested in front of the railway company’s headquarters. Public solidarity meetings are also planned in several cities, and SAV members use solidarity petitions on their street activities. In Aachen, the GDL branch discussed its relationship to the SAV, and decided to officially collaborate and invite SAV members even to meetings of the strike committee.

### Potential for Left must be realised

The situation in Germany is paradoxical at the moment. While government and the media claim economic growth has improved the situation, there is no growth in support for the government. Instead, ‘public opinion’ moved to the left. The governing parties are nervously awaiting the important regional elections coming up in 2008 and the general election scheduled for 2009.

At the same time, there are few generalised protests or movements, at the moment. Industrial disputes like the one of the train drivers are continuing but remain separated from each other because of the policy of the trade union leaderships at the moment. The new Left Party has increased support in opinion polls and a limited influx of new members but does not act as a fighting, class-struggle based party of the working class, and is in danger of missing opportunities to build a mass socialist party, if it does not change its policy to a fighting and socialist one.

Currently, there is no general mood to fight back and to get active, at the moment, amongst workers and youth. But the situation remains potentially explosive.

Consciousness is developing to the left, which could get a further leap as economic recession develops. However, it must be said that, in a situation where the official labour movement is not offering a combative alternative, neo-fascist groups, using populist or anti-capitalist demagogy, are also getting more active and remain a serious threat.

With a combative and socialist leadership in the trade unions and in the Left Party, the potential for resistance could be realised and the working class could go on the offensive. As this is not the case, at the moment, the class struggle and the creation of a new layer of activists will, in all likelihood, develop in a protracted way. The intervention of Marxists in struggles can, however, make a difference, and give examples which can be taken up by other workers fighting back.