

Germany: Protests spread as unemployment tops 6 million

Wolfgang Weber
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On February 6 some 40,000 people nationwide took part in demonstrations held outside unemployment offices. Their protests coincided with the release of the latest official unemployment figures, which registered a total of 4,823,000 jobless workers, or 12.6 percent of the working population.

An additional 2 million unemployed are not counted in the official jobless figures, either because they are unregistered, or they are covered by early retirement, retraining programs or other government schemes for those unable to find work.

Not since the winter of 1932-33 have so many Germans been unemployed. The jobless rate in east Germany is particularly high, standing at 21.1 percent. The number without work in the east has increased by 180,000 since January 1997, and now stands at 1.6 million. In most towns and cities one in four persons of working age is unemployed.

A sharp increase in joblessness is expected this year because expenditures are being cut back sharply by federal, state and local governments. In the east many of the so-called employment schemes will also be coming to an end. Some 200,000 jobs in the auto industry are forecast to go, nearly one-third of the present work force.

The protests were largely directed against Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who is being held responsible for the relentless rise in unemployment. When Kohl came to power in 1982, replacing the Social Democrats, unemployment stood at 1.8 million in West Germany. It has risen continually since then, and with increasing speed since reunification in 1989.

In the spring of 1991 when Kohl told the east Germans, "I am convinced the east will become a blossoming landscape within three to five years," there were 900,000 unemployed in the former GDR. When

unemployment in the east reached the record levels of the 1930s, in the winter of 1995-96, the chancellor, together with the employers and the unions, promised that the jobless rate would halve by the year 2000. Since then the government, corporate management and the trade union bureaucracy have all distanced themselves from these promises.

The federal government feared that the release of the latest unemployment figures would unleash a wave of protests similar to those recently occurring in France. The Kohl regime blasted in the media about an "employment initiative" which would "bring more unemployed into work."

By this, however, the government did not mean the creation of more jobs; not a single pfennig of new public spending is planned. Instead the social security offices and local councils will increase their pressure on the long-term unemployed and welfare recipients, such as single mothers, to take low-wage jobs, threatening them with the loss of all benefits.

Some unemployed groups did organize protests following the French example, where many unemployment and social security offices were occupied. One of the most frequent slogans there was "Rather French circumstances than American conditions."

For years the unions in Germany have been hostile to these unemployed groups. This time, however, they reacted swiftly to bring the demonstrations under their own control. With their banners and placards they turned the protests into election rallies for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has also had a hand in the destruction of jobs and social programs during Kohl's tenure as chancellor.

The two SPD officials contending to lead the party in next September's federal elections have made clear

they agree that unemployment should be tackled along the lines of the American or Dutch models, i.e., through the spread of low-wage jobs and part-time employment, and more cuts in social welfare.

The main speakers at the protests were SPD union bureaucrats, the same individuals who have cosigned one deal after another accepting cuts in jobs and wages. Their presence was doubtless one of the reasons that, with the exception of some cities and towns in the east, the demonstrations were relatively small, generally attracting no more than 150 people. In the east German town of Halle, where some 50,000 are registered as unemployed, only 100 joined the demonstration. The largest protests were in Erfurt (7,000) and Berlin (2,000).



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