

German unions and the extreme right wing

Poll shows political affinity

Our correspondent
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A survey by the *infratest dimap* institute published at the end of August revealed that trade union members are more likely to support extreme right-wing parties than those who are not organised. Asked whether they could 'consider voting for the Republikaner, the DVU or NPD,' three neo-fascist parties, 11 percent of those union members questioned answered 'yes, certainly', or 'yes, perhaps'. Amongst those not organised in unions the figure was 7 percent. The results were even worse amongst young voters. Almost one in three young trade unionists (32 percent) between the ages of 18 and 24 said they might vote for an extreme right-wing party. Of those youth not in the unions, 17 percent shared this position.

When unemployed union members were questioned, there were 20 percent who thought they might vote for one of the radical right-wing parties, against 14 percent among unemployed not in a union.

The head of the German Trade Union Association (DGB), Dieter Schulte, described the results of the survey as 'bad'. He said there had been 'omissions' in the unions' work with its young members, and that the DGB now wanted to undertake more educational work on the theme of right-wing extremism and xenophobia.

However, this cannot explain the glaring contradiction between organised and non-organised youth. If anything, it is probably the latter who have had less exposure to educational work regarding right-wing extremism. The survey throws up the question, to what extent is there a connection between the general orientation of union politics and such an increased acceptance of extreme right-wing parties?

The nationalist slogans of the extreme right, quite often accompanied by a large degree of social demagoguery, appeal to fears for the consequences of globalisation. Confronted by such a seemingly all-

powerful global force, the neo-fascists seek to comfort their supporters with tales of the superiority of the 'German race and nation'. In place of a struggle between social classes, they preach the struggle of Germans against foreigners. Powerless in the face of capital, they direct their anger against everything that is foreign and defenceless.

The reaction of the unions to globalisation bears similar features. They have long since abandoned the class struggle. The policy of 'social partnership' of the 1970s was accompanied by strikes and protests, which not infrequently led to certain social improvements. This has given way to the complete integration of the unions into management structures. Repeating the slogan of government and employers, 'defend German industry', union representatives from shop stewards in the factories up to those entitled to sit on the companies' supervisory boards, have made their 'contribution' to increasing labour productivity by agreeing to speed-ups, harsher sickness regulations and sackings.

This not infrequently takes on an anti-foreigner tone. For example, in mining and in steel they pressured Turkish immigrant workers into accepting redundancy payments 'so as to be able to return home', by which they meant Turkey. Klaus Zwickel, the head of the largest German union, the IG Metall, to which hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers also belong, said in a press interview that he was in favour of 'quotas' for foreigners, 'to take the burden off the German labour market.'

The unions no longer attract workers who are seeking a means to fight against exploitation and oppression. Whilst many older workers remain in the unions out of a misplaced sense of tradition, the level of organisation amongst younger workers has plunged dramatically.

Amongst the small number of youth who do join can be found not a few careerists who regard the union bureaucracy as a means to a well-paid job, and those who consciously agree with the right-wing politics promoted by the official labour organisations today.

See Also:

How the social democrats and the Greens have contributed to Germany's social misery

[12 September 1998]

How the German government and parties pave the way for the extreme right

[17 July 1998]

See the election web site of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)

[In German]



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