

# German Armed Forces Federation to demonstrate against cuts in defence budget

Peter Schwarz  
10 September 1999

For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, uniformed soldiers will demonstrate against the government on September 11. The *Bundeswehrverband* (Armed Forces Federation) has called a demonstration in Berlin against the cuts in the defence budget, and some 5,000 are expected to participate.

The cuts in the coming year add up to DM3.5 billion (US\$1.9 billion), and will total almost \$10.3 billion by 2003. The Federation's chairman, Colonel Bernhard Gertz, called the reductions a "striking breach of trust" and "a policy which cannot be justified in relation to our soldiers and their mandate." He continued: "There must finally be an end to this! The mood amongst the soldiers is agitated."

Uniformed soldiers are not permitted to participate in political demonstrations. In the 1980s, conscripts who took part in peace demonstrations wearing their uniforms received harsh punishments. Cognisant of this problem, the organisers have labelled the Berlin demonstration an "extraordinary Federation conference" and are holding it in the International Congress Centre (ICC).

Extensive legal documents have been attached to the invitations, referring to numerous statutes and court decisions, so as to make the case that the gathering concerns the "preservation and promotion of the work and conditions of soldiers" and "is not a political meeting in terms of paragraph 15 of the National Service Act ". Accordingly, uniforms are permitted.

On closer inspection, these arguments prove to be specious.

The size of the defence budget is a highly political question. It determines what proportion of the national income is to be spent for military purposes, or, more generally, what weight the army and militarism will

have in society. A civilian society distinguishes itself from one dominated by the military, among other things, by the fact that this question is decided by politicians, and not the military.

The principle of the "citizen in uniform", to which the *Bundeswehrverband* statutes expressly refer, derives from this basic consideration. This principle presupposes that a citizen, even if in uniform, makes decisions in his function as a citizen and not in his function as a soldier—that he has in mind the interests of the whole of society, not the narrow interests of the military.

The Federation, which originally represented soldiers in legal questions concerning their military service and social rights, along the lines of a trade union, is now mobilising its members as a lobby for an increase in defence expenditures. It is standing the principle of civilian rule on its head: from the "citizen in uniform" to the "uniformed citizen", who should regard each restriction in the defence budget as an attack on "we soldiers", that is, as a personal offence.

The full significance of the demonstration is revealed when it is placed within the context of current foreign and defence policy discussions. The view is becoming generally accepted that Germany must apply greater force to promote its national interests on the world stage. Since the end of the Warsaw Pact, NATO has lost its meaning; despite professions of mutual support for the Atlantic Alliance, tensions between Europe and the US are intensifying.

The *Bundeswehr* itself does not stand outside these discussions. In February, in the *Defence Policy Reader*, intended to educate officers, the following appeared: after "more than forty years of integration into Western structures," a "more powerful Germany" is to be expected, which "clearly defines its interests and aims

and self-confidently acts in matters of international policy".

Foreign policy can only be self-confident if it is backed by military force. Minister of Defence Rudolf Scharping made this unmistakably clear in an interview with *Welt am Sonntag* (The World on Sunday): "One cannot play permanently in the foreign policy world league if one is slipping towards the second division in defence policy."

However, the ascent into the premier military league requires an enormous increase in military expenditure, something on which all experts agree. Modern weapons systems which the *Bundeswehr* lacks today—precision guided munitions, surveillance satellites and transport aircraft—devour sums in the billions.

This is where the political problems begin. Public opinion is not prepared for such an increase in defence expenditure, while at the same time social expenditures and pensions are being drastically trimmed. When Minister of Finance Hans Eichel announced his programme of spending cuts, Scharping—who had taken office only on the condition that the defence budget not be reduced—had to accept the budget proposals with gritted teeth. However, the cuts are not nearly as high in military expenditure as has been indicated. Much has simply been transferred into other budget areas, as, for example, the entire cost of the Kosovo War.

Nevertheless, in order to implement the desired increase in defence expenditure, public opinion must be turned around. The September 11 demonstration serves this purpose. The organisers stress they are not protesting against the military leadership, nor against Defence Minister Scharping, who is an invited speaker. Instead, it is a matter of exerting "influence on the process of political opinion-forming".

In order to lure as many ordinary soldiers as possible, the calls for the demonstration made by the *Bundeswehrverband*—which is led by high-ranking officers—stress the social effects of the cuts: lower pay, fewer career opportunities, personnel cuts, base closures and more forced transfers. But the Federation also calls for German defence capabilities to be strengthened. A press release says, "So that contracts may be completed, the capital part of the defence budget must be supplemented discernibly."

The September 11 demonstration is symptomatic of the increasing significance of militarism in public life.

Since German reunification, the *Bundeswehr* has been deliberately transformed from an instrument of defence into an intervention force, which can act outside of Germany's borders. This reached its high point in the Kosovo War.

Along with this shift, its weight in domestic affairs is growing. Draconian punishments against pacifists, who cite the Tucholsky saying, "soldiers are murderers", are just as much a part of this picture as the public spectacle of massed recruits taking their military oath, accompanied by martial torchlight processions. The *Bundeswehr* demonstration against the government's budgetary policy means this development has reached a new stage.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**