

German Chancellor Schröder booed at May Day rally in Leipzig

2 May 2002

The German trade union federation organised a total of 500 demonstrations across the country on May Day. Under the slogan “Organise globalisation fairly”, the DGB demanded tighter controls for global competition, including minimum social standards world-wide, a ban on child labour and stricter regulations for the finance and capital markets.

Although Germany’s engineering trade union, the IG Metall, combined the May Day rallies with preparations for imminent strike activity in connection with demands for higher wages, participation at the demonstrations was limited. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) spoke at the central DGB rally in the eastern German city of Leipzig. During his speech some 200 students and school children lay on the ground in a symbolic act to highlight the decline of education in Germany. When Schröder reacted to the protest with the sentence, “I cannot judge the situation in this state,” he was roundly booed by the assembled students.

In anticipation of national elections planned for the autumn, Schröder gave a speech praising the record of his SPD-Green Party coalition government. He called on the trade unions to support the policies of his government.

Few of the leading politicians and union functionaries who spoke at the various rallies raised the recent events in France and the participation of the neo-fascist Le Pen in the second round of presidential voting. The SPD and the unions did not want to deal with the fact that the social democratic government of Lionel Jospin had opened the path in France for the most reactionary forces.

Instead, the chairman of IG Metall, Klaus Zwickel, gave a speech in Berlin that concentrated entirely on the union demand for a wage increase of 6.5 percent. “We clearly need more money,” he said, “to encourage

economic recovery.” He went on to justify the wage demand by arguing that only increased purchasing power could bring about an economic revival. Zwickel had little to say about the enormous social cuts being implemented in Berlin by a local government consisting of the SPD and PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism).

Just 1,000 took to the streets in the West German city of Cologne in a march characterised by the eagerness of young people to discuss the situation in France and its implications. For their part, the trade union functionaries on the march were reluctant to engage in discussion on any other topic other than the impending wage struggle.

Encouraged by the electoral success of Le Pen in France, the German neo-fascist NPD (German National Party) sought to carry out its own May Day marches in a number of German cities. In several towns the neo-Nazis marched through the streets shouting, “We are the people” (a slogan popular with East German demonstrators in 1989 prior to German reunification) and “USA—international centre for mass murder.” They were met with a host of counterdemonstrations and were forced to abandon their marches in a number of cities. In the eastern German city of Dresden 10,000 marched in a demonstration against the NPD.



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