

German metalworkers strike brought to an end

Dietmar Henning**21 May 2002**

On May 15, a nine-day strike in the metal and electronics industries in the German states of Baden-Wurttemberg and Berlin/Brandenburg came to an end.

In Baden-Wurttemberg an agreement was reached between the IG Metall engineering union and the employers to effect a two-stage resolution to the dispute. Although the wage agreement is supposed to apply retrospectively from March 1, 2002, there will be no pay increases until June. From then, wages and salaries will rise by 4 percent and from June 1, 2003 by a further 3.1 percent. The wage agreement is to be valid for a term of 22 months or to December 31, 2003. Employers' representative Otmar Zwiebelhofer has calculated an increase in wage costs, averaging 3.46 percent for this year.

This brings to an end a strike which, as far as the trade union was concerned from the very start, had the aim of defusing the mounting anger in German factories resulting from the deteriorating social situation. In order to safeguard the standing of the SPD (German Social Democratic Party)-Green Party coalition government, the strike was used to cautiously allow the workers to let off a little steam. It was an effort to forestall even the possibility of any unexpected development that might embarrass the federal government during the parliamentary election campaign in September. IG Metall is exploiting every possible means to pre-empt Chancellor Gerhard Schröder losing the coming election in the face of widespread popular opposition—as happened in the case of his predecessor, Helmut Kohl (CDU—Christian Democratic Union), in 1998.

Metalworkers and electricians in Baden-Wurttemberg had been striking for higher wages since May 6, and in Berlin/Brandenburg since the Monday of the following week. The last strike in western Germany occurred in Bavaria seven years ago; in Berlin and Brandenburg the last one was in 1930!

In calling for the strike, the Industrial Metalworkers Union (IGM) was reacting to widespread disenchantment in the workforce. After four years of the SPD-Green coalition, workers and their families have noticeably less in their wallets and purses owing to government policies supported by the trade unions, combined with steep price increases resulting from the introduction at the start of the year of the common European currency (euro). With real wages having fallen even further over the last four years, workers have become sick and tired of being asked to content themselves with the situation.

This frustration is accounted for by the fact that, while company profits rose by 96.5 percent between 1980 and 2000, workers' real net wages sank by 0.4 percent over the same period. The unemployment rate also increased threefold from 3.3 percent to 9.6 percent in this time. Management, above all, have directly benefited from the increasing profits of recent years. Since 1999, their salaries have been increasing on average by about 30 percent each year. The two years from 1998 to 2000 alone show a rise of 64 percent in the executive salaries of all firms on the German DAX shares index.

Profits were gained primarily by intensifying working conditions on the shop floor. For example, the productivity of the average worker in the metal processing industry rose by almost 40 percent from 1995 to 2001. According to local trade unionists, the factories were "seething" due to the unfair distribution of profits, yielded from the labour of the workers. Many shop floor union meetings had proposed demands ranging from 9 to 12 percent (10.4 percent on average) prior to the wage negotiations.

The mood in the workshops was also reflected in the results of the strike ballot. Of the approximately 220,000 trade unionists eligible to vote in Baden-Wurttemberg, 90 percent voted for militant action. In Berlin/Brandenburg there was a yes-vote of about 86 percent. About 95

percent took part in the ballots in both regions. Given the mood of the workers, IG Metall had no alternative but to begin the strike in order to maintain control over the workforce.

The union was unable to prevent the strike, but it is instructive to look at how it was conducted. Firstly, IGM's leadership lowered the workers' wage claim of 6.5 percent for the tariff negotiations. They proclaimed that "at least a four" was to stand in front of the percentage point by the end of the round. As usual, the trade unions sought a nicely rounded-off percentage figure for the final agreement: this time a wage rise of exactly 4 percent.

At the same time the tactic of the so-called "flexi-strike" was adopted in order to avoid a proper strike. The "flexi-strike" had one aim and one aim only: the maintenance of the production process and the extraction of ample profits—despite the strike. In a departure from past practice, several large firms were not to strike over a long period; instead, strikes were to be conducted "flexibly", here and there for a day at a time. In principle, it was to be a stringing together of warning strikes. Such a tactic involves no great losses for the firms and puts little real pressure on the employers. The *Handelsblatt* business newspaper commented tersely: "Here a strike, there a strike. Modern production planning can handle that pretty well." For example, the Porsche auto works plans to compensate for the approximately 10 million euro loss in turnover on the first day of the strike by organising extra shift work at some time in the future.

Officially, this kind of strike was chosen by IG Metall "to avoid greater damage", as union boss Zwickel said, and particularly to deny employers any grounds for a lockout: businesses, unable to carry on production because their parts suppliers are on strike, are legally entitled to send their staff home without pay. These workers receive neither strike money from the trade union nor a short time allowance from state employment offices, as was formerly the case.

Consequently, industrial action involving lockouts would entail enormous social and political upheaval. But this is precisely what the trade union bureaucracy seeks to avoid at all costs. "We're ready to negotiate right now," declared Zwickel at the works gate at the crack of dawn on the first day of the strike. The so-called industrial action had begun there just a few minutes earlier. And in the following days the IGM chairman continued to exclaim: "Our aim is to come to an acceptable wage agreement as quickly as possible after the beginning of

the strike."

The tactic of avoiding lockouts by exploiting the "flexi-strike" is completely in line with the policy of the governing SPD-Green coalition and its programme of co-operation with the trade unions. Prior to the last national elections, the SPD and Greens promised the workers to change the so-called anti-strike Paragraph 116, enacted by the government of Helmut Kohl (CDU) in 1986. This paragraph stipulates that no short-time state allowance is to be granted to workers during lockouts. The SPD-Green government has failed to keep this promise, while continuing to earn the express approval of the trade unions.

Federal Labour Minister Walter Riester (SPD), Zwickel's second in command in IG Metall four years ago, wrote in a letter to IG Metall on June 28, 2001: "The announcement of ... a review of Paragraph 146 of Social Ordinances III entails one of several necessary steps whereby the legal benefits accruing from unemployment insurance are to be examined and, if necessary, altered. In the reform of Social Ordinances III currently being prepared, we have deliberately reached an agreement—after arrangements with the Alliance for Jobs, Training and Competitive Enterprise, among other bodies—to deal with the question of legal entitlements to unemployment insurance not in this but in the next legislative period."

In other words: the Alliance for Jobs—based on a collaboration of the trade unions, the government and the employers—has agreed not to change the anti-strike paragraph. This fits in perfectly with the general social and economic policy of the SPD-Green government. Whether in relation to pensions, health or taxation policies, financial burdens are to be lifted from the firms and dumped on the shoulders of the working population.

Thus the government is running the risk of being punished through the abstention of its former voters in the coming federal election in September, a development already detectable in the recent state elections in Saxony-Anhalt, where the SPD suffered its greatest losses since the end of the Second World War.



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