

Protest without perspective: comment on recent anti-war demonstrations in Germany

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8 November 2002

Large numbers of workers and young people participated in the recent demonstrations and meetings held in over 80 German cities against the planned US invasion of Iraq. Those who organised these events and spoke from their platforms, however, provided no perspective for a struggle against imperialist war.

Instead, it was all reduced to the lowest common denominator: “No war!” But without a clear conception of the political means required to stop war, this slogan remains just a pipe dream. Some of the organisers regard vagueness as a virtue, since the lack of a political orientation makes it possible to unite the most disparate political viewpoints, as well as religious and humanitarian convictions.

Speakers recalled the peace movement of the 1970s, “when millions took part with the most diverse motives”, praising this in the highest tones. It did not ever enter their heads that the resurgence of global military conflicts in recent years and the present threat against Iraq reveal the ultimate failure of this movement and its pacifist perspective.

The absence of any serious political orientation makes it easy for the ruling elite to either ignore the protests or exploit them for their own purposes.

This became clear at the October 26 demonstration in Berlin, when a trade union representative addressed the crowd. The deputy chairman of the Unified Service Sector Union (ver.di) in Berlin, Guenter Bodin, read out a resolution from his organisation: “The regional conference expressly supports the statement by Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder that he and his government will ‘not participate in a war against Iraq’, nor provide financial support.”

“We are decidedly against German soldiers being used as auxiliary troops for the US government in its war against other peoples,” Bodin quoted from the trade union resolution.

What was trumpeted as refusal to go to war against Iraq was in reality a lining up of the trade union officials behind their “own” government, which has declared war on the working class at home and is getting ready to launch the sharpest attacks on social and democratic rights. Bodin knows this very well. The first official act of Interior Minister Otto Schily after the re-election of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party coalition consisted of threatening public service workers with

dismissal if they do not accept a wage freeze.

Since then, not a day has passed without the “Red-Green” government announcing harsh cuts in social spending. Last Friday, for example, it was announced that the government wants to save 6.5 billion euros in the coming year alone by slashing unemployment benefits. Among other things, nearly a third of the 1.3 million long-term unemployed will lose their financial support under new assessment regulations.

The unions have done nothing to oppose these attacks at home. Should the German government’s foreign policy shift to support of war, it will do nothing to oppose its foreign policy either.

The whole of modern German history makes this clear. In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, when the trade union leaders declared, “We will not abandon the fatherland in the hour of need,” their next act was to conclude a social truce with the government and suppress every social demand.

Even if today ver.di lines up behind a government that is critical of US war plans, this changes the reactionary consequences of their politics very little. The present “pacifism” of the Schroeder government is merely an expression of its present military weakness. Because it cannot (yet) compete militarily with the US, it relies on diplomacy. At the same time, it is carrying out the systematic and intensive rearmament of the *Bundeswehr* (German Armed Forces). A large share of the funds that are being cut from social spending is flowing directly into the military’s coffers.

In its first four years in office, the “Red-Green” government has done more to develop Germany into a global military power than its conservative predecessors had in the previous 16 years. It has participated in two wars—Yugoslavia in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001—and deployed German soldiers in 16 different states and regions—from the Balkans and Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa. It increased spending on foreign military missions tenfold.

The Schroeder government only opposes American war plans insofar as they stand in the way of its own imperialist interests. It fears that German business will be excluded from the lucrative markets of the oil-producing countries and that the US will establish unrestricted control over Persian Gulf oil. Fear of the economic consequences of rising energy prices and the

destabilisation of the region also determine its attitude.

The trade unions' attempts to channel opposition to the war behind the Schroeder government must be decisively rejected. Bodin's praise for Schroeder only makes clear that the trade unions will collaborate closely with the government in shifting the burden of war onto the backs of ordinary people.

In the effort to turn broad anti-war sentiment into support for the "Red-Green" government, Green Party parliamentary deputy Hans-Christian Stroebele plays a similar role in relation to young people and other social layers as Bodin does with union members.

Stroebele sees his job as keeping anti-war activity under control. His message is that the Greens belong just as much to those opposed to war as they do to the warmongers who head the party. He provides a left cover for the turn by the Green Party leadership toward militarism. Last year, he voted in the *Bundestag* (parliament) against sending German troops to Afghanistan, while ensuring that some similarly inclined Green Party deputies voted in favour, so that the deployment was approved by a majority.

In an interview with the WSWs at the start of the Berlin demonstration, Stroebele stressed that the planned war against Iraq was "clearly a war of aggression and contravenes international law". He said it was necessary to argue "much more consistently against this war". The government should not be allowed to beef up the German deployment in Afghanistan—in order to relieve American troops—nor should it permit the use of American bases in Germany, because support for a war of aggression runs contrary to the German constitution.

When he addressed the demonstration a few minutes later, however, he raised none of these demands. Stroebele avoided any open criticism of the "Red-Green" government. Instead, he presented the various German military interventions as distinct cases that should each be evaluated on its individual merits. Thus, he said he had agreed to the deployment of German soldiers in Macedonia, since no war was presently taking place there and the task of the German *Bundeswehr* consisted only of guaranteeing the protection of the international observers.

Stroebele's position on the Macedonia intervention—he first voted against, then abstained and finally voted in favour—clearly shows that his attitude towards the *Bundeswehr* does not differ in principle from that of his Green Party colleague and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who pushed through participation in both the wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan against resistance in his own party.

Like Fischer, Stroebele regards the *Bundeswehr* as a politically neutral instrument that can serve peaceful or militaristic purposes depending upon the circumstances. The reason for his change of mind in the Macedonia question—"no war is taking place in Macedonia at the moment"—ignores the character of the regime that the *Bundeswehr* is helping to keep in power. The installation of bourgeois nationalist regimes in

Macedonia and the other newly arisen Balkans states, which politically and economically are completely dependent on the great powers, keeps the Balkans conflict on the boil and must inevitably lead to new, violent conflicts.

Stroebele's opposition to the Green Party leadership is not at all serious. Within the Greens, he functions as something of a left-wing clown. In the summer, when the leadership placed him on a party list that had no prospect of winning, he stood instead as an independent candidate in the Berlin-Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, running on the slogan: "To torment Fischer, vote Stroebele!" The political task posed in waging a struggle against war, however, is not tormenting Fischer, but rejecting his politics and the boundless opportunism that characterises the Greens.

In the struggle against the threat of war against Iraq, this means no confidence in the SPD, the Greens or the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The PDS will only oppose rearmament and war so long as it is excluded from the government. Wherever it has been granted government posts on the state and local level, the Party of Democratic Socialism has shown itself a reliable supporter of the SPD.

The opponents of imperialist war and militarism must turn to the great social force that is no longer represented by any of these political parties—the international working class. The mobilisation of the working class—independently of all the parties in the *Bundestag* and against the entire system of class privilege—must become the basis for the development of an international movement against militarism and imperialist war.

The fight against war must be linked with a programme that takes up the burning social questions of the day: jobs, wages, education, health care, housing and the fight for the defence and expansion of democratic rights. Its central axis must be the fight for social equality.



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