

May Day at the pleasure park

German trade unions organise a symbolic protest

Ulrich Rippert
8 May 2003

It has become something of a tradition for the central German trade union organisation (DGB) and its individual trade unions to organise a noisy protest action prior to selling out. The trade union functionaries call upon the rank and file to fight factory closures, mass redundancies, rock-bottom wages, the dismantling of the welfare state. They loudly proclaim the anti-social behaviour of managers and politicians, but only after the measures directed against their members have already been worked out and are just awaiting the bureaucrats' signatures.

This year's trade union May Day protest was a perfect example of this bizarre and hypocritical spectacle. Fearful of the growing anger unleashed by the policies of Germany's SPD (German Social Democracy)-Green Party coalition government, the DGB organised its central protest rally in a remote area, Hintertaunus, in the German state of Hessian.

The old craft houses of the serene spot of New Anspach (population 15,000) featuring a museum village, was the backdrop to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's May Day speech in which, point by point, he defended his so-called Agenda 2010 consisting of sweeping attacks on pensions as well as benefits for the unemployed and sick.

A selected audience duly provided accompaniment to the chancellor's speech with whistling and catcalls. They then cheered the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, who called upon his party comrade, "dear Gerhard", to make a few changes to the proposed reform programme: "It cannot continue like it is."

This week, the *Spiegel* magazine reported that at the end of the meeting the pair had agreed to meet in the chancellor's offices on Tuesday, May 6 for a working

breakfast. "At the meeting the chancellor and the DGB boss intended not only to consult over the details of the controversial reform plans for unemployment payments, protection against redundancy and sick pay." In other words the whole protest circus organised by the DGB and widely reported in the media—"whistles against the chancellor", "trade unions on confrontation course", etc.,—was aimed merely at disguising the real role of the union apparatus as a key player in the implementation of massive cuts in the social fabric.

Most of the 7,000 trade union bureaucrats and factory stewards carted along to the May Day rally were members of the mining, chemical and energy trade union, which belongs to the most conservative wing of the German trade union movement and whose chairman, Hubertus Schmoldt, has expressly given his support to the main elements of Schröder's Agenda 2010.

All those planning to take part in the trade union rally in the idyllic open air museum of Hessian park, situated miles away from any big cities or industrial areas, were forced to pass through a series of police cordons. Many cars, particularly those with young occupants, were searched, and a number were prevented from proceeding further, although police neglected to give any reason for this action.

At the entrance to the open-air museum, an entry fee of one euro was demanded, and then every participant was thoroughly searched and their pockets checked. All penknives, soft drink bottles and thermoses were confiscated, but demonstrators were allowed to keep their banners and leaflets. At a table of the IG Metall, free whistles were distributed.

The narrow streets and the small assembly area were

hardly sufficient for the thousands of participants. Many of them carried trade union flags and banners declaring: “Reforms yes—but carried out fairly”, “Schröder is an anti-social desperado”, “Shame on you Schröder”, “Workers mobilise—for the wage round in 2003” and “Whoever seeks to make savings at our expense, has to deal with us first”.

Immediately prior to addressing the crowd, Schröder was flown in to the rally by a helicopter of the paramilitary German border police. From the start, his speech was accompanied by a chorus of whistling and booing. However the phoney nature of the protest immediately became apparent as the DGB chairman began to speak of the good old days of reformist social collaboration. Suddenly the catcalls stopped and were replaced with cries of “Yes, indeed!”, “That’s right!” and “Bravo”.

If the trade unions were serious about opposing the government’s programme of welfare cuts they would have had no problem organising numerous rallies across the country, all attended by tens of thousands. Instead, they did everything they could to keep the demonstrations small and signal their support to the government. Completely unknown bureaucrats addressed the May Day rally in the German capital of Berlin, and made a point of appealing for humane and tolerable measures when it came to implementing the cuts.

There was another remarkable feature of this year’s May Day rallies. The many thousands of working class families who had taken part just a few weeks ago in mass demonstrations against the Iraq war were nowhere to be seen. Their absence was mirrored by the lack of young people turning out on May Day. It was above all youth who organised a myriad of initiatives and actions to protest against the war. Instinctively they turned their back on the farce staged by the trade unions.

The struggle against the government-planned cuts has in fact just begun. It requires a broad popular movement that consciously links up with the international mass mobilisation against war. In this respect, it is vital to understand the connection between the recent Iraq war and the plans to attack the living standards of millions of unemployed, pensioners and disabled. The conquest of Baghdad has encouraged the most reactionary forces inside the American government to press ahead with their aggressive foreign

policy aimed at imposing the most brutal forms of exploitation across the globe.

For its part, the German government has nothing to offer in the way of an alternative. Its attacks on the social conditions of the weakest layers of society go hand in hand with its efforts in the field of foreign policy to establish the closest links with the American administration.

“Pleasure park” was the derogatory term used by former chancellor Helmut Kohl to describe Germany and justify his own plans for sweeping social cuts.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact