

Union leaders call off crucial strike

Lessons of the German metalworkers' struggle

Ulrich Rippert
17 July 2003

Sometimes there are events which occupy the headlines for just a day or two, but which nevertheless mark a fundamental political turning point. Only later is the full historical significance of the event clearly evident.

The July 6 decision by the executive of the German trade union IG Metall to declare the collapse of its four-week strike in the east German steel and electrical industry is just such an event. It is the biggest defeat for the trade unions for decades. For the first time since 1954 the trade union has totally capitulated to the terms of the employers and called off the strike after four weeks, in which the union achieved nothing.

The calling off of the strike does not only affect those concerned but also represents the opening shot in an all-round offensive against the entire working class. As if bursting a dam, employers organisations and the government will proceed even more aggressively to strip away all the social gains made by the working class over the past 50 years. At the same time, the defeat represents a milestone in the decay of the trade unions themselves. The myth, that by relying on its relatively high level of organisation and extensive participation in management decision-making the German trade unions would be able to repel the introduction of American-type conditions in Germany and prevent the dismantling of the welfare state, has been finally laid to rest.

In a delayed fashion, but therefore with all the more force, a development has begun which echoes the defeat of the American air traffic controllers at the hands of Ronald Reagan in 1981, or the historic defeat of the British miners just 20 years ago by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Since then, in both countries, the working class has suffered one defeat after the other.

Now the same process is under way in Germany. The process of reversing the gains of the German welfare state will be speeded up. Just two days after the capitulation by the IG Metall executive, the chairman of the large service industry trade union Ver.di, Frank Bsirske, signed a wage deal which represents a net wage pay cut of between 8 and 13 percent for all its 100,000 union members in the state of Berlin.

The end of the strike, which was aimed at achieving equal working times in the east and west of the country, was jubilantly greeted by the media and politicians across the political spectrum. The tone of the commentaries was very similar, declaring that from the very beginning the strike was called "with the wrong aim, at the wrong time and in the wrong place."

The fact that this estimation is shared by all the main political parties and has been repeated in mantra-like fashion by the press, radio and television, as well as by experts on talk shows, does not alter the fact that it is false to the core.

The strike did not collapse after four weeks because the demand was false or the struggle was unpopular with workers. Quite the opposite! The fact that 13 years after the reunification of Germany workers in the steel

and electrical trades in the east of the country were paid less than their colleagues in the west, although doing the same work, was regarded as a scandal—and not just by those affected. Recent figures indicate that an average east German worker earns just 70 percent of the wages paid to his west German counterpart.

The strike received widespread support. Considerably more than 80 percent of the members asked agreed to support the strike and many nonunion workers took part in strikes and protest actions, although they received no support from the union. In the working class areas in the states of Saxony, Brandenburg and Berlin there was a broad sentiment: "It is about time for the trade unions to wake up and do something about the deplorable inequality in the treatment of workers in the east and west of the country." Broad sections of the general population also responded with considerable sympathy to the demand for more equality, even if it was limited to the issue of equal working time.

At no point, however, was the trade union leadership prepared to make use of this broad wave of solidarity. The powerful propaganda apparatus of the industrial union with the biggest membership in the world was operating at a minimum. Those on strike were systematically isolated and left defenceless in the face of enormous hostile pressure from the media.

The demand for more equality unleashed a virtually hysterical reaction on the part of business organisations, politicians and representatives of the media. Comments saying the strike would lead to a "jobs massacre" and the trade unions would leave behind them a "bloody trail" of growing unemployment were typical. The weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, which is jointly edited by former social-democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt, bluntly demanded: "The right to strike has to be curtailed."

One reason for the hysterical reaction to the demand for equal wages and working conditions is the plan for extension of the European Union (EU) to the east—a move which has the full support of German business and political circles. Such support is based on the prerequisite that after East European membership in the EU, a reservoir of cheap labour will remain and that the huge differences in wages between east and west will stay in place over the long term. In order to prevent demands for equal wage rates and working times from countries like Poland, Rumania, the Czech Republic and Hungary, which will also soon join the EU, it was important to establish a precedent.

The decisive factor in bringing about the end of the strike, however, was not the aggressive opposition of employers federations and the media. Trade unionists who pose the issue in this way and complain at length about the extent of the "resistance put up by the employers" must ask themselves the question: what else did they expect? That the employers would oppose any action was well known. In fact, the point of the strike was to break the employers' resistance.

The most significant opponent of the strike came from inside the trade

union itself and comprised a right-wing faction inside IG Metall, led by the chairman, Klaus Zwickel. This faction openly stabbed the strikers in the back and sabotaged the strike movement all along the line. Already in the spring of this year Zwickel had openly declared his opposition to the demand for the introduction of a 35-hour week in east Germany and from the very beginning was opposed to the strike.

Two months ago the second chairman of the union, Jürgen Peters, who is responsible for wage issues, surprising won the election on the executive to succeed Zwickel, who is due to retire in the autumn. Zwickel's own favoured candidate from the state of Baden Württemberg, Bertold Huber, was left high and dry. Since then the strike for the introduction of a 35-hour week in east Germany was tied to the struggle inside the IG Metall over who should take over from Zwickel.

There are no other terms to describe Klaus Zwickel's role in the strike than sabotage and strikebreaking. Behind the backs of the strike leadership he indicated his opposition to the strike to the employers federations and signalled that the failure of the strike would suit his own aims in the internal union conflict. The arrogance and provocative behaviour of the president of the industrial employers federation, Martin Kannengießer, was above all based on the fact that he knew he had the backing of the chairman of the union.

At the same time, Zwickel established contact with the heads of the shop stewards committees in the big car companies in the west of the country and arranged a deliberate campaign against the strike to begin as soon as production in the west was hit by the strike action in the east. Instead of using the consequences of the strike in the west to put extra pressure on the east German employers, Zwickel's tactics meant the strikers faced an additional front of opposition.

Although just prior to the end of the strike it was clear that leaders of the strike movement in the east were prepared to make all manner of concessions, the employers stubbornly held their ground. Following a long round of extensive talks, including a private consultation between Zwickel and Kannengießer, Zwickel declared that the talks had achieved nothing and called off the strike.

Union members who had overwhelmingly voted in favour of strike action two months previously, including significant sections who supported an extension of the strike, were simply ignored. Zwickel imposed his line against the union's own wages commission and all constitutional bodies, making clear in the process his own contemptuous attitude toward union democracy.

The end of the strike has seen an intensified campaign against the leaders of the strike, in particular Peters and the main union representative in the east, Hanno Düvel. Based on the influential shop stewards from the big car and industrial plants in the west and others in the strike leadership, Zwickel sought to mobilise the most conservative and right-wing elements inside the trade union in order to impose his favourite, Bertold Huber, as his successor.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

Huber and Zwickel represent a layer of trade union functionaries and shop stewards who look upon themselves as co-managers and see their job as working closely together with the respective management in pushing through social cuts and redundancies as effectively as possible while suppressing any opposition.

Huber describes himself as a reformer and agitates in the union as an "opponent of maintaining living standards." He criticises Schröder's Agenda 2010 from a right-wing standpoint. He has called for a "massive reorganisation of the private pensions schemes" and favours an increase in the pension age. At present the average German worker takes retirement at age 61—he wants to increase this to 65.

Huber objects to some of the latest proposals for cutting pack on unemployment benefits and instead favours the reduction of payments for

young unemployed "to less than 12 months." "The substance of the welfare state is not endangered when individual payments are cut," he declared in an interview with the German business newspaper *Handelsblatt*. In the same interview he called for an end to coverage in the state health insurance scheme for accidents occurring during workers' free time and as a result of other risks. In essence his politics are all directed at the dismantling of the welfare system in the interests of German big business.

Peters, Düvel and their supporters have no real alternative to offer. They have been intimidated by the offensive mounted by the right wing in the trade union and merely demanded more determination while recalling the heady days of union militancy in the 1970s. Not one of them dares to openly challenge and expose the right-wing corrupt group surrounding Zwickel, which is organising strike-breaking at the highest levels of the union. Instead, Düvel has declared he is ready to resign "at the right time" and Peters has acknowledged his "own mistakes" in the running of the strike.

Peters and company are paying the price for remaining passive in the spring of 2000 when it was revealed that Zwickel was involved in a corrupt deal with the executive of the Mannesmann company. As a result, Zwickel is currently under investigation by the state attorney's office in Düsseldorf. Nevertheless, inside the union no one raised any real objections and Zwickel was allowed to carry on with his manoeuvring.

The reason for this political cowardice is self-evident. None of the competing factions inside the trade union is prepared to undertake a conflict which could, at a certain point, threaten the existence of the German government. After all, virtually all of the leading functionaries in the union are members of the two governing parties and support their policies.

At the very beginning of the steel workers strike the German trade union federation (DGB) called off a series of protests and demonstrations it had organised against the government's Agenda 2010. This was the first step in undermining the steel workers strike, whose own demands were clearly irreconcilable with Agenda 2010, which envisages sweeping dismantling of the welfare state.

Just one day before the end of the strike the chairmen of eight different trade unions and the DGB met with Chancellor Schröder and offered to collaborate with him in the implementation of Agenda 2010—a move described in the media as kowtowing. The magazine *Der Spiegel* commented: "Nobody does this as well as the IG-Bau (building workers trade union) chief Klaus Wiesehegel." At the beginning of May, Wiesehegel had speculated over the possible resignation of the chancellor, while describing his cuts plan as "cynical and a vile blow to human dignity." Now, he said, it was necessary to recognise that trade union influence over the parties is "less than we thought" and he announced, "in future we will offer our own advice with regard to government decisions."

Ver.di trade union head Frank Bsirske, a member of the Green Party—who in March had accused the chancellor of "betrayal" and "naked dismantling of the welfare state"—now offered his collaboration and warned that without making such a move the trade union would lose its room to manoeuvre.

With this sharp turn to the right the trade unions are reacting to the consequences of the Iraq war. The profound conflict between the US and Europe, which was evident both before and during the war, has furthered narrowed any basis for social compromise and concessions. The reaction of the German government to the challenge from America is to press forward with the introduction of American-type conditions in Europe and drive down wages and welfare state provisions.

The trade unions have nothing to offer in the way of an alternative. Twenty years ago it was right-wing governments who took on and defeated the trade unions. Now in Germany the offensive has been mounted by the SPD-Green Party government, which was elected five

years ago to reverse the anti-social policies of its predecessor government. This development makes very clear that the working class requires a new political orientation. It needs a party which puts at the heart of its programme the principled defence of social rights and gains and takes up the struggle for an international, socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact