

European-wide protests against social cuts and mass unemployment

Half a million demonstrate in Germany

Our reporters
5 April 2004

Half a million demonstrators took to the streets of Germany on Saturday, April 3, to protest against government cuts to welfare state provisions and pensions. The protests were the biggest in Germany since the mass mobilisation of 350,000 workers in Bonn against the social policies of the conservative government of Helmut Kohl. Two years later, in 1998, the Kohl government was replaced by the current SPD (German Social Democratic Party)-Green Party coalition that came to power promising to put an end to the dismantling of the welfare state begun under Kohl.

The protests Saturday were part of a European day of action organised by trade unions and social organisations to protest attacks being carried out by both social-democratic and conservative governments throughout Europe. Demonstrations, meetings and rallies took place in a total of 16 European countries in both eastern and western Europe. Alongside Germany, the biggest demonstration took place in Italy, with an estimated half a million, including many pensioners, taking to the streets of Rome to protest the latest measures of the Berlusconi government for so-called “pension reform” and other social cuts.

The biggest turnout in Germany took place in Berlin, with an estimated 250,000 demonstrating to express their anger and disgust with the policies of Germany’s SPD-Green Party coalition government. In Stuttgart, up to 150,000 took part in a demonstration in the city centre, and turnout in Cologne was estimated at 100,000.

The demonstration in Berlin began with three massive marches from different points of the city, converging in a central rally at the city’s Brandenburg Gate. The trade unions and various social organisations that had organised the protest estimated a participation of up to 100,000. In the event, traffic was brought to a standstill as the entire city centre choked with demonstrators, young and old, and from all walks of life. At the same time, it was evident that a broad swath of the demonstration comprised rank-and-file trade union members—the traditional voting base of the German Social Democratic Party.

The anger and militancy of those taking part was unmistakable. Numerous banners, large and small, called for the immediate scrapping of the “Agenda 2010.” Other banners demanded the resignation of German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his government and called for the construction of a new political alternative. Placards also condemned the role played by the Green Party in actively supporting the most drastic attacks on welfare and social rights in modern German history. Some banners also linked the issue of social devastation with militarism and the drive to war. Tables were set up along the roadside to collect signatures for the immediate

withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

This latest demonstration was the third major rally in the German capital in a little more than a year. In February of last year, half a million gathered in Berlin to oppose the US-led war in Iraq. In November, an estimated 100,000 gathered in the capital to protest the implementation of drastic attacks on the German welfare state and social system—the so-called Agenda 2010 of the Schröder government.

The November 2003 rally was organised independently of the trade union movement, and the size of the event came as a shock to the union bureaucrats. Saturday’s demonstrations represent a deliberate attempt by the trade unions to contain popular anger against the government and its policies, but once again the leadership was surprised at the response. Official figures for the rally in Berlin on Saturday put the total number of participants at a quarter of a million.

The main speaker at the Berlin rally was the chairman of the German trade movement (DGB), Michael Sommer. In his speech, Sommer issued a “warning” that the government was acting recklessly in defying public opposition and in continuing to push ahead with its assault against the German welfare state. Sommer sought to appease some of the concerns raised by those attending the rally, while at the same time avoiding any concrete commitment for a withdrawal of the Agenda 2010.

Sommer appealed for an end to the redistribution of social resources from the poor to the rich and called for an end “to policies that harm the mass of the population while the rich become even richer and capital and its managers become even more brazen.” Sommer also decried the introduction of “American conditions” in Germany.

At the same time, Sommer’s comments on the government were guarded and vague. He mentioned the German chancellor just once: “The chancellor and the conservative opposition must know that if they continue with these anti-social policies, we will come again.” He attacked specific elements of the Agenda 2010, such as the demand for unemployed workers to take any form of work, but while declaring in a general fashion that the trade unions would refuse their solidarity with the government on the issue of Agenda 2010, Sommer failed to provide any perspective for effectively opposing or reversing the Agenda proposals.

While calling for a “social Europe,” Sommer refrained from addressing any concrete developments in Europe and made no mention of the recent elections in Spain and France, which saw a move to the left by broad layers of the population, in particular young voters. Conservative governments in both countries felt the brunt of popular resentment directed at Spanish support for the Iraq war and

anti-social policies introduced in both countries.

Sommer's warning to the government was also taken up by the guest speaker at the Berlin rally, Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the French CGT, who reiterated that unmistakable signs of public discontent must serve as a "warning" to those in government.

Teams of supporters of the WSWS attended all three rallies in Germany and distributed hundreds of copies of the European election programme of the German Socialist Equality Party.

The WSWS interviewed participants in the demonstrations in Germany.

Heidi L. is a railway worker who had travelled from the east German state of Saxony Anhalt to take part in the Berlin demonstration. She told WSWS reporters: "The atmosphere where I work is very tense, and there is considerable discussion amongst the colleagues about the repercussions of the eastward expansion of the European Union. We have been directly threatened by the shift of our jobs to eastern European countries such as Poland or the Czech Republic. Older workers such as myself do not stand a chance on the job market should we become unemployed. We just seem to be hit at the moment from all sides.

"We are told that our jobs are under threat, and the trade unions say they can do nothing about it. At the same time, unemployment benefits are being cut and someone like me is confronted with 10 years of poverty until I can properly retire. Then we are now confronted with the prospect of our pensions being eroded. Workers like myself have made contributions for decades, and after a lifetime's work we expected that we would not have to scrimp and save in our old age. I am still in the union, but I know colleagues and friends who have left and say that the membership fee is not worth it. We have not come here to hear empty promises. We want definite alternative proposals from our leaders and not just hot air"

More than 100,000 demonstrators marched from the Cologne suburb of Deutz across the river Rhine for a rally in the middle of the city. Demonstrators waved rattles and blew whistles distributed by the trade unions to express their anger with the social policies of the government and make clear their opposition to the Agenda 2010.

Many banners demanded the immediate withdrawal of all cuts to the welfare state. Homemade banners called for the resignation of the government led by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Green Party).

While demonstrators directed their fury and protests at the government, the main speaker at the rally, the leader of the IG-Metall engineering workers union, Jürgen Peters, sought to divert the broad mood of discontent with the government by directing his fire against the conservative opposition parties and the German employers' federation.

Peters complained that "salaries for managers were exploding, even when factories had hit rock bottom.... Managers and employers were saying one thing and then doing the complete opposite." "Not with us!" he retorted. It should be noted that just last year, Peters, together with the former IG-Metall functionary Hasso Düvel, jointly purchased their own villa for the princely sum of 660,000 euros.

"We need more employment, we need more jobs!" he demanded and added that the trade unions expected from the government "jobs that pay a living wage... [U]nprotected menial jobs with mini-wages, lacking any tariff and social protection are the wrong way to go."

Then, however, Peters went on to direct his speech to recent proposals made by the conservative opposition parties, declaring that they were "running amok." Peters sought to emphasise that the

conservative opposition represented a worse alternative to the current government. In so doing, he was echoing the plea made just a day before by newly appointed SPD general secretary Klaus Uwe Benneter, who stated that the trade unions had to realise "who was their real enemy."

An estimated 150,000 took part in the central rally in the south of Germany. They travelled to the city of Stuttgart in 1,100 buses and 19 trains hired especially for the demonstration. Local leaders of the trade unions estimated a possible attendance of up to 50,000.

Banners on the demonstration were unequivocally directed at the government's Agenda 2010: "Scrap Schröder's Agenda," "Sack Schröder," "Who has betrayed us?—the social democrats; who has assisted them?—the Green Party," etc.

For their part, speakers at the rally went to great lengths to avoid any sort of direct ultimatum against the government. The chairman of the state trade union organisation, Rainer Bliesener, declared: "This day of action will be followed by others...until policies change.... This is democracy at work." The motto for the demonstration in Stuttgart and nationally—"Stand up to make things better"—was equally vague and noncommittal.

The main speaker at the rally was Frank Bsirske, chairman of the public services trade union, ver.di. As was the case in Cologne, Bsirske concentrated his attacks on recent reactionary proposals made by leading figures from German conservative opposition parties. He portrayed the situation as if nothing could really be done about Agenda 2010, and that the main task was to oppose policies proposed by opposition parties and the employers who claim that the Agenda does not go far enough. Bsirske limited himself to friendly advice to the Schröder government, calling upon it to increase public investment and revitalise public spending while warning the chancellor that he was alienating the rank and file of his own party.

DGB officials supported by the police brusquely prevented supporters of the WSWS from setting up a literature table. Despite the abusive response of the trade union bureaucrats, WSWS supporters continued to distribute material and the SEP election programme to participants at the rally.

The radical tone and criticism of the government at all three rallies in Germany by trade union bureaucrats—who are well known for their close collaboration and links with SPD leaders—are an unmistakable indication of the trade union chiefs' fear that they will no longer be able to contain the anger and discontent brewing amongst rank-and-file workers and union members. Following a series of electoral drubbings for the SPD and slumping membership in both the SPD and the trade unions, the bureaucracy used the platforms at Saturday's rallies to issue its clearest warning so far that the policies of the SPD-Green Party coalition are creating intolerable and increasingly uncontrollable social tensions that could threaten the future of the government and even the SPD itself.



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