

Germany: tens of thousands protest against government assault on welfare state

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Normally, the term “summer break” applies not only to German schools, universities and cultural events, but also to political life. Politicians, together with functionaries of the trade unions, political parties and public and private organisations, use the summer months to take their holidays. The press fills its columns with “summer recess” themes, which are briefly blown up and then quickly forgotten. Debates, meetings and protests are put off until the autumn.

When, therefore, in the middle of a summer heat wave, tens of thousands take to the streets of cities such as Magdeburg and Leipzig, as well as many smaller towns that have never experienced large demonstrations, it is an unmistakable indication of a profound movement at the roots of society.

On August 9, some 40,000 took part in protests against the so-called Hartz IV laws—the centrepiece of the government’s Agenda 2010, which represents the most far-reaching assault on social and welfare benefits in the history of modern Germany.

The protests were concentrated in the states of eastern Germany. The biggest demonstration, involving 15,000 people, took place in Magdeburg, where the movement took root just three weeks ago. But protests also took place in a number of smaller towns in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, which, with an official jobless rate of 20 percent, has one of the highest rates of unemployment in Germany.

Three thousand rallied in Halle and Dessau, 2,000 in Aschersleben, and 1,000 each in Halberstadt, Osterburg, Haldensleben and Quedlinburg. Some 10,000 took part in a demonstration in Leipzig and 4,500 in Rostock. Smaller demonstrations attended by several hundred people took place in western German cities such as Dortmund, Gelsenkirchen and Hamburg.

This writer has participated in numerous demonstrations in Germany and abroad, many of which were far larger than that which wound through the middle of Magdeburg on the evening of August 9. Nevertheless, the demonstration on that day had few parallels.

The banners of political parties, trade unions and other organisations that normally dominate such political demonstrations were entirely lacking. There were just a few isolated banners and placards, mostly handmade and consisting of verses declaring: “Down With Hartz IV, We are the People,” “Our Pockets are Empty, but Schröder Wants More,” “Without Jobs, Without a Roof, Without Means, Without Hope,” and “You Won’t Get Your Hands on My Savings Book!”

There was little of the noise that is so prominent on most protests. Apart from a few whistles, individual demonstrators shouting slogans, and a megaphone at the head of the march, the protest was characterised by an atmosphere of animated conversation and discussion.

To some it may seem hackneyed to say it, but here it was, indeed,

the people who had taken to the streets: ordinary men and women of all ages and from all walks of life, people who under normal circumstances do not actively participate in politics.

The first demonstration four weeks ago in Magdeburg was initiated by a 42-year-old unemployed railway worker, Andreas Ehrholdt, who distributed a few handmade leaflets. He had estimated that perhaps 200 would turn up. In fact, 600 responded.

One week later, this figure had grown to 6,000, and by August 9, the crowd had swelled to 15,000. The organisation of the movement remains in the hands of Ehrholdt. In the meantime, protests spread like wildfire, and within a week demonstrations had sprung up in other towns.

There too, it was usually individuals who took the initiative. Only in a few isolated cases did the trade unions or PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor party to the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany—the SED) try to take control of the organisation of the demonstrations.

Some commentators maintain that desperation and fears for the future had driven people to protest, but this is only partially the case. It is true that many participants are plagued by problems. They do not know what to do or whom to turn to.

One could hear fathers or single mothers telling reporters how they had to count every cent to determine whether they could afford a trip to the zoo or buy clothes for their children, and just how much money remained from the current monthly unemployment stipend of 331 euros. The official government justification for Hartz IV, i.e., that lowering the level of unemployment payments will increase the incentive to find work, is pure hypocrisy to men and women who have sought work in vain for many years.

Nevertheless, it is not desperation and fears for the future that dominate the mood of the demonstrations. There is a more optimistic element—a deeply rooted belief in social justice. Anger with the ruling parties is accompanied by the conviction that it is possible to change things, should public pressure be maintained long enough. However, few of those taking part have a perspective that goes any further.

It was striking that many of those demonstrating against Hartz IV had taken part in the mass demonstrations 15 years ago that eventually led to the downfall of the former Stalinist regime of East Germany: The initiator of the Magdeburg demonstration, Andreas Ehrholdt, was one of those who in 1989 had fled to West Germany via Hungary. The many parallels that have been cited between these Monday demonstrations and those of the autumn of 1989 are neither superficial nor accidental.

A number of former civil rights activists, who have since acquired political influence (and wealth), have angrily argued against parallels

being drawn with 1989. Joachim Gauck, the former official responsible for documents relating to the East German secret police (Stasi), declared that such a comparison was “stupid and forgetful of history.” At that time it was an issue of freedom and democracy, he argues, now it is “only” a question of social well-being.

However, those taking to the streets were not prepared to separate the one from the other. In 1989, they had hoped for a better and more fulfilling life—only to be bitterly disappointed. But in spite of the current catastrophic situation, they are not prepared to simply resign themselves to joblessness and poverty.

One of the organisers of the 1989 Monday demonstrations, the rector at the famous Leipzig Nikolai Church, Christian Führer, responded to Gauck by declaring, “One cannot promote the slogan: ‘We hail your taking to the streets against the communists, but now you have to shut up.’ This cannot be accepted.”

When asked, many of those taking part in the demonstration stated that they had formerly voted for the SPD (Social Democratic Party—the party of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder). They invested no hopes in the conservative opposition parties, or in the PDS.

According to opinion polls, the PDS is likely to increase its influence in forthcoming state elections in Brandenburg and Saxony, but such support lacks deep roots—not only because, as part of the state government in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, the PDS has supported attacks on the German welfare state system, but also because former SED supporters are still active within the party, and these people are generally well-known and despised.

Many demonstrators stated that one could not trust any of the prominent political parties. However, they had no idea what could replace them. Most hoped that they would simply give way to public pressure. Erholdt expressed his conviction to media representatives that the government would eventually withdraw Hartz IV. He emphasised that he did not seek the downfall of the government. After all, he said, he knew what would follow.

The sudden and spontaneous growth of the movement has led to panicky reactions in political and media circles. They are fearful that the movement could grow and escape their control.

A commentary in the Magdeburg daily paper *Volksstimme* clearly articulated these fears. “Politicians, trade union functionaries, and church leaders appear unsure. There is considerable danger in the leaderless demonstrations, driven by moods (in contrast to 1989, the churches are not playing a leading role in the protests),” the *Volksstimme* wrote. “The growth of independence could be the first symptom of a crisis for the state.” Political circles must “heed the harsh warning signal.”

Official reactions to the protests can be divided into two camps. The first hysterically attacks the demonstrations. These commentators recall the well-known saying of the playwright Bertolt Brecht, who, after the workers’ revolt of June 17, 1953, declared it would be easier “if the government dissolved the people and voted in another.”

Prominent in this respect is Wolfgang Clement (SPD), who, as the government labour minister, bears direct responsibility for Hartz IV. He accuses his critics of encouraging an unacceptable hysteria and playing with fire. The right-wing Seehem Circle inside the SPD has gone so far as to publish a statement arguing that it would be preferable to lose the upcoming state elections rather than make any concessions with regard to Hartz IV.

In a commentary, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned of the misconception “that the state is an institution insuring against all the risks of life,” and revived the old prejudice that those dependent on

social welfare payments are spongers. The paper jeered: “This vengeful protest has little to do with the real situation in the country or its problems. Combined here are nostalgic day-dreaming, despondency, and fears of losing out, which end up as a pan-German celebration of state socialism.”

The weekly magazine *Spiegel* has adopted a similar line. In a longer article under the headline “The Great Hartz Hysteria,” it attempts to demonstrate that the bitter resistance can “hardly be explained on the basis of the actually agreed cuts.”

The second camp adapts to the criticisms of Hartz IV, in order to establish control over the movement. Such forces extend from the former chairman of the SPD, Oskar Lafontaine, to SPD politicians such as the prime minister of Brandenburg, Mathias Platzeck, who is currently involved in a state election campaign, as well as the PDS and leading members of the “free market” liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The CDU prime minister of the state of Saxony, Georg Milbradt, declared that he might join the demonstrations, even though his party voted in favour of the Hartz IV measures in parliament, and was, in many cases, responsible for the most drastic elements of the policy.

The tactic of this group centres on demanding a few corrections to the policy in order to rescue the package as a whole. This tactic, however, cuts little ice. Those politicians who argue in favour of a few cosmetic alterations have failed to understand that for the protesters, the issue is not a few additional euros, which would still fail to provide enough for a reasonable standard of living. They want jobs, social security and a dignified life.

Such aims are unobtainable within the current political and social framework. They are incompatible with an economic system that makes its credo the maximisation of profit. The realisation of such aims demands a fundamental reorganisation of national and international economic life on a socialist basis.

There is currently little awareness of these issues or how such serious change can be achieved. There is a danger that the current demonstrations will share the fate of the movement of 1989.

At that time, the mass protests began by demanding freedom and democracy, but were exploited by those who favoured capitalist market relations in order to enrich themselves. The movement against Hartz IV, therefore, must not allow itself to be limited merely to mobilising more and more people week by week. At this point, the most important task is to establish clarity on political aims and perspectives.



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