Germany: protests held in over 140 towns and cities

A WSWS reporting team
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For the fourth consecutive week, tens of thousands took part in protests last Monday against social cuts that the Social Democratic-Green coalition government plans to implement in 2005. More than 60,000 people took to the streets in the cities of Leipzig, Magdeburg and Berlin alone. In addition, demonstrations were held in 140 small and medium-sized towns.

The centre of the protests was again in the east of Germany, where the unemployment rate, currently 18.4 percent, is almost twice as high as in the west. As in previous weeks, the demonstrators represented a cross-section of the population—young people, old-age pensioners and unemployed, but also many workers and self-employed who know that they too will be hit, sooner rather than later, by the effects of the government's "Hartz IV" laws. Many participated with their entire families.

What particularly enraged the demonstrators was the announcement by Wolfgang Clement, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) minister for labour and the economy, that the government planned to create 600,000 so-called "one-euro-jobs" in the public sector. This means the long-term unemployed, who receive benefits (money for housing and heating, plus 331 euros) will be forced to accept jobs provided by the state paying one euro per hour.

Most demonstrators quite rightly took these one-euro-jobs as a provocation. The effect would be the substitution of low-wage employment for decently-paying jobs, rather than the creation of new jobs at a living wage. In Leipzig, two women carried a homemade banner saying: "What did we do to you, Herr Clement, to make you treat us like this?"

In Magdeburg, the state capital of Saxony-Anhalt, where the current wave of protests started, the turnout was "a little less than the week before," according to organizers. However, in many smaller cities in the area, demonstrations were held for the first time.

A team of supporters of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—German Socialist Equality Party), who distributed a statement to the demonstrators, was received warmly, with many of the marchers eager to discuss the political issues raised by the PSG. A 39-year-old truck driver and father of four joined in the distribution of the leaflet.

Although the government—with the support of all the establishment parties, as well as the employers' associations, the churches and most trade unions—has repeatedly stressed there would be no concessions, many demonstrators still believe more pressure from the streets would force the government to retreat.

An elderly man who had participated in the organisation of the protest stressed that pressure from below had to grow "in order to show capital just where its limits are." A retired mechanical engineer said that the movement just had to stick together, maintain its determination, and expand until the "reforms" were retracted. One had to, he said, demand the implementation of the promises made by then-chancellor Helmut Kohl (of the conservative Christian Democratic Union—CDU) to the people in the east at the time of the reunification of Germany in 1989-1990.

Another worker, who had been employed at an engineering concern for 30 years before being dismissed in 1997, carried a homemade sign reading: "Germany 2004. For the CDU, SPD, FDP, Greens and PDS, socialism has been achieved. The people have been locked out."

He complained about the bigwigs of the SED (Socialist Unity Party, the former Stalinist ruling party in East Germany, which renamed itself the Party of Democratic Socialism—PDS— in 1990). They kept their top positions in the factories and workplaces, he said, and fired the workers. He himself had been through that experience.

A middle-aged car mechanic, who has been unemployed since 1992, said that none of his hopes had been fulfilled in the wake of the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany). He had been in favour of Kohl and German reunification, he said, but three years later he was dismissed from his job. Since then, he has been through one training and public employment program after another. He felt, however, that the idea of building a new workers' party was utopian.

A retired economist, who had been a member of the SED and spent his entire working life in a large chemical plant, said that he had warned his colleagues against the reintroduction of capitalism in 1989 but nobody wanted to listen. He had participated in the 1989 demonstrations against the SED

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government because he wanted a more democratic GDR.

He said a new socialist movement had to be built, but thought it was impossible. The PDS, he agreed, could not become the starting point of such a movement. Everybody in Saxony-Anhalt knew that, since the PDS had supported the notorious "Magdeburg model" authored by the minority government of the SPD and Greens, led by Saxony-Anhalt minister president Höppner. However, he would vote for the PDS because the other parties were even worse.

The PSG team met two students of sociology who had come all the way from the (western) city of Hannover to support the demonstrations in east Germany.

In Berlin, there were two separate demonstrations. The protest alliance "Hartz IV Must Go!", which is dominated by Attac and the PDS, marched to the national headquarters of the Greens. This was a transparent attempt to divert pressure away from the SPD and the PDS, which form the government in Berlin. Another initiative, "Mondays Against 2010," which is influenced by a Maoist group, led a march to the SPD headquarters.

Not only in Berlin, but also in Leipzig, conflicts had arisen among the organizers of the demonstrations. In Leipzig, an alliance called "Social Justice—Stop Social Cuts" had invited former SPD chairman Oskar Lafontaine to address the final rally. However, the original organizers of the demonstrations, the "Social Forum Leipzig", would not accept Lafontaine as a speaker.

Forum spokesperson Winfried Helbig explained to the WSWS: "First of all, the invitation to Lafontaine had not been discussed and agreed upon by the Social Forum, and secondly, it ran counter to our principles. We have always said that we want to preserve our independence from political parties and do not want any party representatives or high-ranking politicians in our ranks. Lafontaine is no exception." Helbig said that the Monday demonstrations had emerged as a "citizen's forum," and the platform should primarily be given to people who were personally affected.

On this Monday, many demonstrators in Leipzig voiced their anger over the anti-social policies of the national government headed by SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, as they marched through the historic city centre. While most did not join in the shouting of slogans, the number of banners reading "Schröder Must Go" had increased noticeably from previous Monday demonstrations.

When asked by the WSWS who should replace Schröder if he were forced to resign, two women carrying such a banner replied: "There is nobody today who represents our interests—not the CDU or the FDP (Free Democratic Party). But Schröder must go."

Peter Otto, 54, carried a banner reading: "1989-2004—We Are the People—Betrayal!" He explained to our reporters: "We are being betrayed for the second time. First Kohl promised a flourishing economy, then Schröder promised jobs and social justice. Politics is supposed to be decided upon by the people, but no matter how much we shout that 'We are the people,' nobody takes any notice."

Otto told us that he had worked at an agricultural cooperative. After the collapse of the GDR, he founded his own firm. He invested all his money in machinery and worked 12 to 15 hours a day. However, his business did not have a chance of surviving, given the harsh competition from large companies and the corruption of state officials. He has been unemployed for four years. "What annoys me most are the brazen claims of some politicians that we are just lazy and don't want to work. That's just too much," Otto said.

At the final rally, several unemployed workers spoke from the platform. A dyslexic described the arrogant reaction of the authorities to his disability, and a woman who was almost blind said it was a shame how the government treated the weakest members of society.

Götz Rubisch, an unemployed worker from Halle, exclaimed to applause from the audience: "What have we done to deserve the punishment of poverty? Are we not worth more than one euro an hour? Are we really demanding too much? All we want is to live in dignity through our own work."

He then recalled the propaganda that was used 15 years ago to paint the Western world, above all the US, in rosy colours. "Just remember all these lies they told us! But now we know about the nature of capitalism, and that in the US, many people are forced to have two or even three jobs and frequently work 14 hours to feed themselves and their families—with bad food."

The final speaker was Christa Czech, an elderly woman from Leipzig, who last year wrote a letter to the federal government formulated in the manner of a "complaint," such as was commonly made use of in the GDR. Her letter began with the words: "In the name of all those whose voices are not being heard or who have long given up hope, I want to get involved in politics because I am concerned about the fate of our county."

She then described the situation in the following manner: "One fourth of all Germans share three fourths of all financial means. Three quarters of all Germans, on the other hand, have to share between themselves the remaining quarter. That is a scandal! Before the last national elections, the SPD promised us more social justice. What remains of that? Empty phrases!"

She warned that the lowering of unemployment benefits to the level of social security would drive more and more people into bitter poverty and despair, even to suicide. The top earners, she said, "without exception," should be forced to participate in the financing of the welfare system.

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