

Mounting protests against social cuts in Germany

"Monday demonstrations" spread to more than 100 towns

Ulrich Rippert
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Leipzig—

Protests in Germany against the social cutbacks embodied in the Hartz IV law are escalating. In many towns on Monday, twice as many people participated in rallies than the week before. In other towns, people took to the streets for the first time since the legendary “Monday demonstrations” that toppled the Stalinist regime in East Germany 15 years ago.

Estimates of the total number of participants in the protests range between 85,000 and 100,000.

This growing support for the protests has come in defiance of Germany’s official trade unions. The head of the German Trade Union Alliance, Michael Sommer, explicitly denounced any further demonstrations, warning against “right- and left-wing demagogues.”

Most of the protests have taken place in east German cities, but the western towns of Hamburg, Munich, Kassel, Düsseldorf, Saarbrücken and a dozen other locations in the Ruhr area witnessed smaller rallies.

In Rostock, which is located on the Baltic coast in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), more than 5,000 people braved a storm and torrents of rain to show their anger not only against the federal government, but also against the state government of the Social Democrats and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The state minister for work and social issues, Helmut Holter (PDS), had announced that, while he was not in favour of Hartz IV, he would uphold it and personally supervise its correct implementation. The PDS is the successor organisation to the former state party in East Germany, the Stalinist SED.

In Berlin, the police had to hermetically seal off the national party headquarters of the SPD, to prevent demonstrators from storming and occupying the building. Here, too, the protests were directed not only against the national government, but also against the SPD-PDS coalition that forms the city council. Harald Wolf (PDS), who heads the economics department in Berlin, had provocatively

declared that he saw much good in the Hartz reforms.

In Magdeburg—where the present wave of protests began four weeks ago, after an unemployed worker distributed homemade leaflets—far more people turned up than the previous week, and also in other towns of Saxony-Anhalt, including Halle, Ascherleben and Dessau, demonstrations grew in size.

One of the largest protests took place in Leipzig.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Leipzig was a centre of the workers’ movement. It was here that, in 1863, Ferdinand Lassalle founded the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein (German Workers’ Society), which 12 years later was to unite with the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (Social Democratic Workers’ Party) led by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht. The first issue of the *Vorwärts* newspaper, which was to serve as the central organ of the SPD for decades, appeared in Leipzig in 1876. In the autumn of 1989, the mass demonstrations against the SED regime began in this city.

When thousands gathered in front of the Nicolai church last Monday, recollections of the last weeks of the GDR were to be heard at every corner. Homemade banners read, “We have brought down a government before” and “1989-2004: We’re back!” The old slogan “We are the people!” was taken up again. Indeed, broad layers of the people had turned out, including pensioners and youth, unemployed and employed, entire families and people living in the same apartment buildings who knew each other and talked. For many, it was their first or—if they had attended last week’s protest—the second demonstration since the end of the GDR.

It took a long time before the demonstration could start and wind its way through the narrow alleys of the inner city. The crowd was waiting patiently, in sharp contrast to the mood of profound anger that was expressed in discussions. People are outraged about the consequences of the

impending cuts in unemployment benefits. In particular, the government's claim that these cuts will force the unemployed to accept any job is seen as utter cynicism. Most of these people have gone through several training courses and strenuous efforts, all in vain. There simply are no jobs.

Others spoke about the illegal machinations of employers who set up one limited liability corporation after another to collect state subsidies. They pay no taxes—and often no wages for months—and then the firm's founder suddenly disappears or files for bankruptcy. “The whole thing is a huge fraud, and it is the old insider relationships at work. It is the people who used to be in power in the GDR and who stick together,” said Kerstin Kleinert, a clerical employee who had exposed such illegal practices by her former boss.

“We have been thoroughly betrayed,” said Reinhard Sauper. He has been unemployed for four years and, at the age of 50, sees no chance of getting back into the workforce. “Helmut Kohl promised ‘flourishing landscapes,’ and look what happened. Now Schröder comes along and tells us that cuts are necessary in order to create new jobs. This is complete nonsense. It has been a downhill development all along.” The 16-page questionnaire currently being distributed to all those who have been unemployed for more than one year was “scandalous,” Sauper said. “These are impertinent questions, and their only aim is to reduce any claims as much as possible.”

Asked whether he had been on the demonstrations 15 years ago, Reinhard Sauper said: “Of course! At that time, we wanted freedom to travel abroad, democracy and free elections. Today we can vote, but there's no point in it. You can vote for whoever you want, but they are all the same and all have the same program. All parties represent only the rich and their interests. Wasn't it Balzac who said: ‘Nobody ever grew rich on honest work, and behind every great fortune there is a crime’?”

Other participants discussed the statement by Joachim Gauck, the government official who headed the department created to secure and analyse the files of the Stalinist secret police after German reunification. Gauck had said that today's Monday demonstrators had no right to place themselves in the tradition of those of 15 years ago. Then, he said, it was all about great aims—democracy and freedom—and not about egotistical concerns of one's individual survival. “Maybe Gauck demonstrated for Kohl at the time,” an elderly woman with two unemployed children commented, “I didn't.”

In contrast to the feelings of the participants, the speeches at the closing rally were rather subdued. The local head of the IG Metall union in Leipzig, Sieglinde Merbitz, accused chancellor Gerhard Schröder of breaching his promises. He

had promised jobs, but had delivered nothing but unemployment and wage caps. Now he complained that the people did not understand his policies and was financing a large public relations campaign to promote the Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV. “But the reason why we have gathered here,” she exclaimed, “is that we have understood these policies very well indeed.”

She then gave a couple of examples illustrating the effects of the cuts on the long-term unemployed and stressed that they threatened their very survival. A large percentage of the victims, she said, were being dispossessed.

The other speaker, an artist named Mona Ragy Enayat, began by explaining that she had participated in the Monday demonstrations in 1989. The basic democratic rights achieved by these protests, she said, had to be defended today. Schröder had continued and intensified the policies of social injustice initiated by Kohl. After the minor concessions of Hartz IV following the first protests, she said, there were two further “corrections” to be fought for: “First—withdrawal of Hartz IV; second—resignation of Gerhard Schröder.”

This, she said, could not be achieved by demonstrations alone, but required the “organised resistance of the unions and other organisations.” She did not mention that the leadership of the German Trade Union Alliance had explicitly rejected the demonstrations and that even those unions that demand certain “corrections” of Hartz IV entirely agree with the basic thrust of the overall destruction of the welfare state contained in the “Agenda 2010.”

The statement by the Social Equality Party distributed by the party's members and supporters was greeted with great interest. The SEP warned against any illusions about a return to the social reform policies of the 1970s and proposed instead an international socialist perspective that unites workers around the world.



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