

Germany: Monday protests continue against Hartz IV

60,000 demonstrate in Leipzig

Our reporters
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Protest demonstrations throughout Germany against social cuts and the government's Hartz-IV measures continued for the fifth week in a row. On Monday, August 30, tens of thousands took to the streets in more than 200 towns and cities. In east German towns, average attendance was in the thousands, with participation somewhat less in the west of the country.

The biggest demonstration by far took place in Leipzig, where a total of 60,000 marched from the city's Nicholas Church to the central Augustusplatz. In Magdeburg, where the protests first began in July, the demonstration was reckoned to be between 3,000 and 6,000, significantly lower than the week before. According to organisers, an estimated 15,000 took part in protests in the German capital, Berlin.

As was the case in previous weeks, the protests were dominated by those who will be most directly affected by the new measures—the unemployed, social welfare recipients and pensioners. However, many ordinary workers, including office and self-employed workers, alarmed at the prospect of imminent unemployment, also joined the protests.

Conflicts within the organising bodies led to divisions between the demonstrations in a number of cities. This past Monday, as in the previous week, Berlin witnessed two demonstrations independently making their way to the same endpoint—the headquarters of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the German capital. That evening, the SPD executive was holding a meeting inside the building. One of the Berlin demonstrations was called by a coalition of groups comprising the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), *Attac* and a handful of trade unionists, which gathered in front of the city's town hall. The other demonstration assembled in the central Alexanderplatz and was led by an organisation dominated by a German Maoist group (MLPD). In the western metropolis of Frankfurt-Main and many other German towns, demonstrators also concentrated their protests against the local headquarters of the SPD.

In a number of cities supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed a political statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), which posed the connection between the Hartz IV measures and the crisis of international capitalism. The leaflet was received with considerable interest. [See “The Hartz IV measures in Germany and the international crisis of capitalism”]

People from all walks of life assembled in front of the Berlin town hall for Monday's protests—many of whom were affected by the Hartz IV measures. The atmosphere was lively, and demonstrators were keen to discuss. Participants exchanged information about their own situation and were evidently seeking answers to their problems. Only a few had illusions in the policies of the PDS and the trade unions.

It was also clear, however, that lacking a clear perspective, the protests threatened to peter out. The organisers were evidently concerned with suppressing any real political discussion. As with the previous Monday's demonstrations, the speeches given were utterly shallow and limited to the demand for the withdrawal of the Hartz IV measures. Trade unionists merely handed out plastic whistles during the protests.

The participants we spoke to had hardly any illusions in the old parties and bureaucracies, but at the same time were rarely able to explain how the problems could be resolved. They had a clear sense of social justice and were genuinely concerned over social developments. Many participants agreed that it was necessary to tackle the problems at their roots and change existing property relations.

Marinka, a 50-year-old unemployed journalist, who will be personally hit by the Hartz IV measures, said, “The reform is unjust and will do nothing to create new jobs. It is nothing other than wage dumping. The entire package is based on lies. My contact person at the unemployment agency has responsibility for 800 people in the media branch alone. I do not know how to stop the laws, but I think it is necessary to try.”

Eva, 56, is an unemployed saleswoman: “I do want things to change, because things have to change, but I do not have a recipe for a solution. Everyone should unite. There is sufficient wealth at hand; we live in a very wealthy country, it just has to be distributed differently.”

Max, 49, is an unemployed IT worker: “They are just playing at democracy and when that no longer works, they start shooting. They have always worked this way. In 1989, people knew what they wanted to begin with, but then they were forced to succumb to the dictate of Western political parties. Today there is no alternative.”

Udo Franzke, 50, is an unemployed planning engineer: “Things cannot go on this way with living conditions worsening for so

many families. From the first of January next year, I will no longer be able to secure the future of my children.”

In Frankfurt am Main the local trade union federation (DGB) distanced itself from the protests. DGB head Harald Fiedler told the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on August 27 that the DGB and the SPD in Hessian were “certainly not the right people to contact.”

The demonstrators were not impressed, however. The march increased in size as it proceeded through the city centre. In front of the SPD headquarters, protesters changed their slogan from “Hartz has to go!” to “Schröder has to go!” The chants became louder when a number of SPD functionaries showed their faces at windows in the building.

Elise, a middle-aged participant who had a job contract for three years, declared: “I am taking part because I have to reckon with unemployment in three years. It makes absolutely no sense to wait until one is personally hit. By then it is too late.”

Elise works advising unemployed young persons to find training opportunities. When asked her view of the government, she said, “For me it is absolutely terrible, but I do not vote anymore because there is no one to vote for. It makes no sense making one’s ‘X’ every four years, nothing comes out of it. The politicians live in worlds where they have lost all contact with the people—the unemployed, young people and immigrant workers. It is really just a world dominated by big business.”

The main speaker at the Leipzig demonstration was the former chairman of the SPD, Oskar Lafontaine. When he appeared at the beginning of the demonstration at the Nicholas Church, he was immediately surrounded by a throng of reporters and camera teams. Promptly an egg was thrown at Lafontaine, which only just missed him and landed instead on a cameraman. Later, this incident was taken up in all media reports to claim that Lafontaine had received the same treatment in Leipzig as Chancellor Schröder, who, just a few days previously, had been a target of public anger and was also assaulted by eggs.

However, the situation was different. The few whistles that accompanied the opening of his speech fell still as Lafontaine began to repeat his criticisms of the policies of the German SPD-Green Party government.

As he has done on other occasions, he accused the government of deceiving the electorate and declared that it had lost any trust on the part of the people. Schröder’s reform policy was based on “deceit and lies.” This begins with the choice of words used, he continued. Up until now the word “reform” had been used to describe improvements to the social fabric, but the government is currently striving to impose worsening living standards for the large majority of the population. “Whoever understands by reforms just the dismantling of employment protection provision, cuts in unemployment payments, and the doing away of the system based on social solidarity should say so!” Lafontaine called out.

Reforms can only be made with the cooperation of the people, not against them and also not “over their heads,” he continued. It is wrong and stupid to impose the brunt of the reforms on the socially weak while ignoring all those who possess large incomes and wealth. To the applause of demonstrators, Lafontaine cried out, “We are one people! That means, however, that all, I really mean all, have to contribute to social welfare costs,” adding that

anything else is just “pure cynicism.”

Lafontaine called upon the demonstrators to oppose all of those who aimed to whip up antagonisms between the populations of east and west Germany. The divide in society, he maintained, is not between east and west but between “rich and poor.”

While Lafontaine was able to stoke up the atmosphere at the demonstration with his criticisms of the “social and irresponsible” policies of the German government, what characterised his speech was the claim that major social problems such as mass unemployment and increasing levels of poverty could be overcome without questioning the basis of capitalism as a whole.

In a speech lasting nearly 40 minutes, he said nothing about the consequences of globalisation for production or the international economic crisis. He failed to mention that the same policies of dismantling welfare and social gains were being pursued by governments all over the world.

Behind his sharp criticism of the Schröder government, Lafontaine basically repeated the same illusory nostrums regarding the possibilities of a social, humane and peaceful capitalism that he propagated 15 years ago during the period of German reunification. In fact, political reality over the last one and a half decades, not just in Germany but worldwide, has been characterised by growing unemployment, increasing poverty, and the dismantling of democratic rights at home, together with growing militarism and war abroad, which has served to rebuff such illusions.

In this respect, Lafontaine also failed to respond to another important question: if another form of policy is possible under existing social conditions, then why did he not use his position of prominence five years ago to put it into practice? As German finance minister and chairman of the biggest and most influential party in the country, he was in a strategic position to do so. Instead, he resigned his posts without ever giving an explanation. He was, in fact, instrumental in opening the road for a policy that he now criticises so vigorously. That is why Lafontaine lacks credibility in Leipzig—despite the applause he received.



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