

Fifteen years after fall of Berlin wall:

50,000 march to oppose cutbacks in Germany

Our reporters
5 October 2004

While the German government staged celebrations at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to mark 15 years since the fall of the Berlin wall, a large and noisy demonstration took place just a few streets away to oppose government legislation aimed at slashing the country's welfare and social provisions. Under the slogan "Social Justice instead of Hartz IV," an estimated 50,000 protesters marched through the streets of Germany's capital on Saturday.

This latest protest follows a series of "Monday demonstrations," weekly protests in which tens of thousands have opposed the most far-reaching social and welfare cuts in the history of the German Republic.

In recent weeks, leading politicians from both the government and opposition parties, together with the media, have waged a systematic campaign to claim growing public sympathy for the anti-social measures proposed by the German Social Democratic and Green parties. In a radio interview before the demonstration, a prominent SPD leader and former east German civil rights activist, Markus Meckel, welcomed the declining numbers attending recent Monday demonstrations and declared this was an indication of growing support for the coalition government. Saturday's demonstration, however, was a clear indication of the continuing widespread opposition to the dismantling of social gains in Germany.

While 50,000 took part in Saturday's protest, attendance was lower than the 100,000 predicted by organisers a few weeks earlier. The reduced attendance was in part the result of systematic sabotage of the anti-Hartz IV movement by Germany's main trade unions. Leaders of Germany's two biggest trade unions—the IG Metall engineering workers union and the public service worker's union Ver.di—have met to express their solidarity with leading members of the government and refused to give any official endorsement to the widespread opposition to the destruction of Germany's welfare state.

The leaders of these same unions have also intervened frantically in recent jobs and wages disputes at major German companies, such as Daimler-Benz and Siemens, seeking to stifle workers' anger and prevent the emergence of a broad front of opposition to the government. The lower-than-expected attendance Saturday was also bound up with the lack of a

genuine alternative perspective by groups that were instrumental in organising the protest—the "Electoral Alternative-Work and Social Justice," the anti-globalisation movement Attac, and a number of local initiatives that have organised the recent Monday demonstrations.

Though the majority on the demonstration comprised older workers and their families, substantial numbers of younger people and school students were also prominent on the noisy march, which was characterised by the absence of mainstream political parties and most of Germany's trade unions. A small contingent on the demonstration held placards from local groups of the Ver.di public service trade union, while others carried banners and flags from the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism). Members of the Attac movement used the demonstration to distribute material for the forthcoming European Social Forum in London.

The pervasive theme of placards, banners and slogans on the march, however, was criticism of the unjust and socially irresponsible division of wealth in Germany, which will only intensify as the latest government measures take effect. Placards read: "Agenda 2010 and Hartz IV—Wealth for a few, poverty for many" and "Schröder, the German parliament and big business bosses preach austerity but live it up!" Groups from the Turkish and other immigrant communities also joined the demonstration, which featured banners and slogans warning against the danger of a resurgence of the extreme right in Germany.

In discussion with our reporters, many protesters acknowledged that the problems confronting working people in Germany are intimately bound up with the capitalist system as a whole (see below). Nevertheless, organisers and speakers at the rallies before and at the end of the demonstration sought to play down the implications of government policy and limit demands to calls for the withdrawal of the Hartz IV measures, combined with a return to "traditional" forms of reformist policy.

At the rally concluding the demonstration, Andreas Erholdt, who has been closely involved in the organisation of regular Monday demonstrations in the east German city of Magdeburg, emphasised that the aim of the protest should not be the foundation of a new party. Instead, he said, we need "capable

people” at the top to replace Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The main task, he concluded, was to establish a sense of solidarity and “human warmth” as an alternative to naked neo-liberalist policies.

Speaking on behalf of the Leipzig Social Forum and introduced as an “east German people’s rights activist,” Roger Schaumberg declared that the government should learn the lesson from the protests of 1989. At that time, he said, East German premier Erich Honecker was not prepared to listen to the message of popular protest. Appealing directly to the German chancellor, he called upon Schröder to undertake measures to stimulate the domestic economy and increase investment. To this end, Schaumberg concluded it was necessary to intensify the current protests and “believe in ourselves”!

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the demonstration and distributed copies of a leaflet that clearly identified the source of government policy in fundamental changes in world economy (see text). The leaflet also drew attention to the meeting to be held in Berlin next weekend featuring the editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, David North.

Reporters from the World Socialist Web Site asked a number of those attending the rally what they thought of the current wave of protests against the government in Germany, and how they thought the movement should be developed:

Olaf K., 36-years-old, unemployed, travelled from the northern city of Hamburg to attend the Berlin rally:

“I am quite aware of the realities of unemployment in Germany. The new government measures mean that millions of unemployed will be confronted with making do on the pittance one receives in social welfare payments. It is simply not possible to live on such an income. Everything is going up in price, and at the same time one is expected to pay more and more for one’s own health care.

“I have come here today to find out more about the different organisations and standpoints of those opposed to the government’s policies. Many people and groups are putting forward their positions, and it is possible to learn a great deal by taking part in such a protest. I think there is a general recognition that there has to be a change in consciousness, and many people are critical of the capitalist system as a whole. At the same time, it is clear that parties and organisations such as the PDS and Attac are doing their best to keep the movement at a low level and ensure it remains with predictable and harmless limits.”

Stefan, 19-years-old, is a school student from nearby Potsdam:

“For me, the most important question is where this movement is heading. All the problems we are confronting have their source in the system as a whole. The reality of neo-liberalism is the drive to recoup profits at the expense of workers. At the same time, all sorts of tax breaks are on offer for big business

and the rich. This is taking place across Europe.

“I do not believe the government will yield an inch, despite the protests. Government spokesmen are already trying to play down the current demonstrations saying they are just the work of demagogues and people who have failed to properly understand the implications of the Hartz IV measures. In this respect, all the parties here are playing the same tune—including the PDS. In those regions where the PDS is in power, they go along with anti-social measures, while protesting against the same policies elsewhere. The party is completely hypocritical.”

MG, 33-years-old, is an academic who works in Berlin:

“The speeches at the demonstration are well and good, but the real issue is what conclusion should one draw from the situation? Just to say ‘Hartz IV has to go’ is far too simple. The movement cannot just remain at the level of criticism, otherwise it will just be completely ignored by the government.

“Parallels have been drawn between the latest protests in Germany and the mass movement of 1989. Although many took to the streets at that time with serious intentions, the fact is that the movement of 1989 was sold out to those in power. The issue is whether one challenges the foundations of existing relations or not. After German reunification, I joined the PDS; but then I left after it became clear to me that both the leadership and the party’s perspective are incapable of changing anything. First of all, there was the debate about drawing a curtain over the party’s Stalinist past. Then, leading members took posts in regional governments, and the party’s practise was clear to see. I no longer regard the PDS as any sort of convincing alternative.

“I continually hear the slogan ‘Nazis out!’ But the problem has to be attacked at its roots. The real roots of the extreme right are to be found in mass unemployment and the policies carried out by the German government, which is quite prepared to go to war when it suits the interests of big business. Maybe the German army is not in Iraq, but Germany played a leading role, for example, in the war in Yugoslavia. One cannot separate such issues from the attacks and cuts being made to the welfare state.”



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