

German unemployment highest since 1933

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At more than 5.2 million, the number of unemployed in Germany has reached its highest level since 1933, the year in which the National Socialists seized power.

The Federal Agency for Labour (BA) announced a figure of 5,216,434 persons officially registered as unemployed for the month of February. That corresponds to a national ratio of 12.6 percent—averaging 10.4 percent in western Germany and 20.7 percent in the east of the country. The eastern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has the highest percentage, with nearly every fourth inhabitant without a job. Nationally, more than one third of the jobless are long-term unemployed—i.e., they have been without a job for one year or longer.

The federal government tried to downplay these numbers by referring to changed methods of assessing unemployment linked to the government's so-called Hartz IV laws, as well as the cold weather conditions in February. But even if one considers these factors, the number of unemployed has still reached the highest level since 1998, when the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and the Greens took over government. Of the 161,000 increase since January, just 16,000 are due to seasonal winter unemployment.

In addition, the new counting methods do not take into account several hundred thousands of unemployed and underemployed persons. Participants in government training schemes (ABM measures), who work temporarily at the expense of the Labour Agency, are not included in the official figures, and the same applies to those who no longer register as unemployed because they have no prospect of receiving unemployment pay. An additional 76,000 Hartz IV recipients are not included in the statistics because their details were not promptly passed on to the BA by the municipalities. The numerous so-called “mini jobbers” (earning less than 400 euros per month)—whose numbers also rose last year to around 322,000—and the 220,000 so-called I Inc., who receive some funding from the BA, are not counted in the statistics. The actual number of persons seeking a proper job, therefore, is estimated to be anywhere between 6 million and 8 million.

These numbers are an indictment of the political bankruptcy of the SPD and Greens. Six and a half years ago,

they took power because voters were convinced that voting out the previous government of Helmut Kohl would bring about a decrease in unemployment and an end to welfare cuts. But just the opposite has taken place. Unemployment has reached record heights, and cuts in welfare, health provision and pensions have accelerated with the implementation of the Hartz laws.

Last summer was dominated by disputes over the Hartz IV measures. Regularly on Mondays, ten of thousands took to the streets to protest against the new laws. At the same time, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his labour and economics minister, Wolfgang Clement, flanked by Green Party “economic experts,” arrogantly declared that the dismantling of unemployment relief, the lowering of limits regarding what work the unemployed could carry out, and improved mediation by the job agencies would overcome unemployment. The new numbers have thoroughly disproved this thesis.

The absurdity of the statement that unemployment is linked to inadequate mediation is shown by the figures for eastern Germany. In that part of the country, 1.8 million unemployed persons are chasing just 54,000 jobs. That corresponds to one job for every 33 unemployed! There was a storm of outrage in official circles, however, when BA boss Frank-Jürgen Weise recently declared that it was no longer possible to find jobs for older unemployed persons in the east. His comments only too clearly revealed the failure of the Hartz laws.

The German government reacted to the bad news in its tried and tested manner: a mixture of arrogance, ignorance and embarrassment. Meanwhile, it tries to suppress any notion that it has an answer to mass unemployment.

Chancellor Schröder told people to hang tough; the government must have the courage to stick with it and not cast doubt on its “reforms,” he said.

Economics and Labour Minister Wolfgang Clement, whose department is directly responsible for labour issues, categorically excluded state-based support programmes as a means of overcoming unemployment. The conception that one could just pump money into these measures, and the economy would simply “run cleanly,” was wrong, he said.

Instead, he directed a helpless appeal to entrepreneurs to show “modern patriotism” and create more jobs.

Just days before the announcement of the new underemployment figures, Clement had begun an absurd campaign against the municipalities, claiming that they were assessing AIDS patients, drug addicts and even coma patients as capable of working in order to pass on some of the social welfare assistance costs to the national treasury—as if shifting some cases from one table of statistics to another would solve the problem.

The conservative opposition parties (the Union) reacted to the new numbers of unemployed with an offer to cooperate with the government. In a joint letter to the chancellor, the chairmen of CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and CSU (Christian Social Union), Angela Merkel and Edmund Stoiber, suggested a “pact for Germany” and assured Schröder they could be counted on to provide “fair and constructive consultation.”

The 10-point programme suggested by the Union recommends a higher dose of the same medicine the SPD and Greens have been administering for years. It aims at removing all the legal, contractual and other regulations that still afford a certain degree of protection to employees against arbitrary exploitation—such measures as contract-stipulated wages, regulated work times, protection against dismissal, industrial safety protection measures and the protection of children and young people.

Union offers to cooperate alternated with shrill attacks. CSU boss Stoiber declared that Chancellor Schröder was responsible for increasing support for the ultra-right NPD, while his secretary-general, Markus Söder, even accused the chancellor of being responsible for child abuse and sex murders. For his part, Jürgen Rüttgers, CDU chairman in the state of North-Rhine/Westphalia, referred to the recent scandal involving the visa policies of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, which he declared represented the “biggest violation of human rights since 1945.” In fact, the German State Department had merely eased some of the complications involved in the acquisition of visas.

Despite the hysterical tones, the offers made by the Union are not just of a rhetorical nature. In light of growing social tensions, efforts are increasing in both the Union and the SPD to bring about a “grand coalition.”

Thus, in Schleswig-Holstein, where the recent election of the state parliament ended in a virtual draw, the local head of the CDU, Peter Harry Carstensen, agitated strongly for a coalition with the SPD. After the rejection of his offer and the formation of an SPD-Green minority government supported by a local pro-Danish organisation (SSW), Carstensen pinned his hopes on votes from rebel SPD delegates to assist his bid to become state prime minister.

Increasing political pressure on Foreign Minister Fischer to resign because of the visa affair should also be seen in this connection. A resignation by Fischer would probably mean the end of the SPD-Green coalition in Berlin and would make the way free for a grand coalition on a national level.

The last—and only—grand coalition on a national level occurred in 1966 when the governing Union parties came under increasing pressure from the working class and dragged the SPD into government as a junior partner. This grand coalition went on to implement mass redundancies in the mining industry and adopt emergency laws in the face of intense popular opposition. It was finally replaced in 1969 by the first SPD-led national government of the post-war period, which headed off student and worker protests in the years 1968-1969 with a series of social and democratic concessions.

Today, the task of a grand coalition would consist of implementing a social and economic policy, which has met with broad popular opposition and which lacks the least democratic legitimacy. The closing of ranks by the major parties in view of the catastrophic number of unemployed clearly expresses the profound gulf that separates them from the broad population, and of which they are becoming increasingly conscious.

In contrast to the coalition of 1969, a new coalition would not augur a new period of social reforms. The global economy, dominated by transnational companies and international financial markets, excludes such a possibility. Such a coalition would be the inevitable prelude to intensified attacks on democratic and social rights.

The catastrophic extent of unemployment is graphic proof of the failure of the social reformist programme of the SPD, which had set itself the task of taming capitalism in the interest of the working people. Today, the overcoming of unemployment and the defence of social and democratic rights require more than the replacement of one government by another. What is necessary is the transformation of all of social and economic life on the basis of a socialist programme that elevates social interests above the profit motives of big business. Such a programme can only be realised on an international basis by the united political action of the working class.



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