

German engineers kidnapped in Iraq

Stefan Steinberg
8 February 2006

Just one month after the freeing of German aid worker and archaeologist Susanne Ostoff, two German engineers were kidnapped in Iraq by a hitherto unknown insurgent group on January 24.

Ostoff and the two engineers are the first Germans to be kidnapped in Iraq since the start of the war. Their abductions have taken place following the inauguration of a new German coalition government under Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Party—CDU), which has made clear its desire for closer links with Washington. The kidnappings also come on the heels of fresh revelations that Germany's previous Social Democratic-Green Party government was providing behind-the-scenes assistance to the US war effort in Iraq.

The two men, Rene Bräunlich, 31, and Thomas Nitzschke, 28, both from the East German city of Leipzig, were abducted outside their workplace in the industrial town of Baiji, 110 miles north of Baghdad. The two men originally intended to sleep in a building adjacent to the factory in Baiji, but were then moved to a guesthouse a kilometre away. As the two men drove to work on Tuesday, January 24, with an interpreter and an Iraqi driver, they were stopped by at least six men wearing Iraqi army uniforms, handcuffed and put in the trunk of a car. The kidnappers let the two other men go. Bräunlich and Nitzschke had only arrived in Iraq the previous Sunday.

The group behind the kidnapping subsequently issued a video showing themselves with their captors. The kidnappers identified themselves as "Followers of al-Tawhid and Sunnah Brigades" and issued demands that the German government close its embassy in Baghdad and that German companies cease all operations in the country. The kidnappers issued a 72-hour ultimatum, after which they said they would kill their captives. This ultimatum has since expired. The German government has declared that it has been unable to make any contact with the kidnappers, and the fate of the two men currently remains unknown.

What is clear is that the two engineers were sent by their company, Cryotec, on a six-day mission to finalise the handover of a factory in one of the most dangerous areas of Iraq without adequate protection or supervision. The region in which the two men were abducted is situated in a corner of the so-called Sunni triangle, where the heaviest fighting has taken place between US-led occupation troops and Iraqi insurgents. The town of Baiji houses Iraq's largest oil refinery and is widely regarded as a "no-go" area for Western civilians. Troops of the allied coalition can only move inside the area in heavily armored combat vehicles.

When asked by the media about the security precautions made for the two men, Cryotec's managing director, Peter Bienert,

repeatedly refused to answer, declaring that any statement on his part might serve to jeopardise official efforts to free the pair. In fact, Bienert was well aware of the risks facing his workers in Iraq. His company was active in Iraq long before Saddam Hussein was toppled and has good local contacts.

The company, which has 15 employees, is active around the world and has participated in projects under the UN-sponsored "Oil for Food" program since 2000. Two projects were completed in 2004, and the company delivered a processor for making medical oxygen to an Iraqi hospital in 2005. In connection with the latter project, which involved the construction of a plant to separate oxygen from nitrogen for the state-owned Arab Detergent Chemicals Co. (Aradet), Cryotec flew six Iraqi technicians to Germany to train them on the equipment.

The German government has refused to give any details on the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of Bräunlich and Nitzschke, but the information available suggests that Cryotec and its managing director cut corners, in particular with regard to security, in order to secure the Baiji contract. According to the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, there was fierce competition from English companies for the contract that eventually went to Cryotec.

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq, more than 200 foreigners have been taken hostage by insurgent and terrorist groups, and 39 have been killed. Despite the obvious dangers to foreign workers, Iraq offers the prospect of big profits and, according to the president of the German-Iraqi Association of Small and Medium-Sized Businesses, Gelan Khulusi, at least 20 German companies are currently active in Iraq. Official figures put the number of German staff in Iraq at less than 50, but non-official estimates put this figure at several hundred.

Other German companies are in the process of re-establishing their offices in Iraq, in particular in the Kurdish-controlled north. Last year, German exports to Iraq returned to their pre-war level of 370 million euros, but this figure is still very small in comparison to the 4 billion euros (US\$4.83 billion) worth of German exports to Iraq in 1982. Overall, German trade links with Iraq had suffered as a result of the Iran-Iraq war (although German companies were active in supplying both sides with armaments), and in particular following the first Gulf War of 1991.

In the course of the nineties, German industry was able to recover some of its losses. From annual exports amounting to 21.7 million euros in 1997, the volume of exports rose rapidly to some 76.4 million euros the following year. The trend continued in 2001, with exports to Iraq bringing German firms approximately 336.5 million euros.

Now, large German companies such as Siemens AG, Germany's

largest engineering company, and Hochtief AG, the country's biggest builder, which had extensive business in Iraq before the war, are lining up to assist in Iraqi redevelopment and reestablish longstanding contacts.

While the rebuilding of a devastated Iraq provides German companies with potentially high profit margins, the same companies are able to use mass unemployment in Germany itself to cut costs and put pressure on workers to accept unreasonable risks. Bräunlich and Nitzschke both come from the eastern German city of Leipzig, which has a high level of unemployment.

Comments by those who knew the two men make clear that they traveled to Iraq reluctantly, but were concerned to hang onto their jobs in a region beset by mass unemployment. Acquaintances of Bräunlich said he made the trip in order to keep his job. "We know Rene Bräunlich very well, and know that it was only the desire to protect his livelihood and keep his job that caused him to take on such a risky task," members of his soccer club, SV Grün-Weiss Miltitz, said in a statement.

Workers employed on the Leipzig industrial estate containing the Cryotec plant told reporters that they could well understand why the two men went to Iraq despite the risks. Unemployment in and around Leipzig stands at more than 20 percent and averages more than 19 percent in the surrounding state of Saxony.

Aside from German economic interests, recent media reports have made clear that the German government has also provided significant material and intelligence political support for the US war in Iraq. The kidnapping of Susanne Ostoff and now that of the two engineers from Leipzig have coincided with mounting revelations that have undermined the myth of German neutrality in the Iraq war.

Recent reports have demonstrated that former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD), his closest co-worker, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) (former head of the German chancellery and government co-coordinator with the intelligence services, and Germany's current Foreign Minister), and the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer (Greens), were informed about and approved the activities of German intelligence (BND) agents in Iraq. These agents collaborated directly with US military intelligence and are alleged to be implicated in military operations against Iraqi targets. Fischer actually met with, and personally congratulated two agents on their work in Iraq.

Following last September's German elections, the SPD-Green government was replaced by a coalition of the conservative Christian Democratic Party, Christian Social Union (CSU) and the SPD. The current ruling coalition has declared its support for the policy of Schröder and Fischer in collaborating with American intelligence forces in the war and occupation of Iraq. The continuity of this policy is exemplified in the figure of Steinmeier, former head of the German chancellery and now German foreign minister.

At the same time, Germany's new Chancellor Angela Merkel has made it clear she is seeking to deepen German-US collaboration. At the 42nd Munich Security Conference held last weekend, Merkel pointedly supported the US line for tougher action against Iran while calling for a strengthening of NATO.

Initially, Germany's parliamentary opposition raised demands

for an official inquiry into the charges made against the BND agents and government ministers. Such an inquiry would have also examined the collaboration of German intelligence agencies with their American counterparts in the kidnapping and interrogation of German citizens alleged to be involved in terrorist activities.

Following pressure, however, in particular from the Green Party, it now appears less and less likely that any sort of official or parliamentary inquiry will be held into the activities of the BND agents in Iraq.

While the current German government was recently able to come to an arrangement (very probably of a financial nature) with the kidnappers of Ostoff, the abductors of Bräunlich, and Nitzschke have raised exclusively political demands. Both Steinmeier and Merkel have ruled out the possibility of any political concessions to the demands made by the al-Tahwid group, thus intensifying the danger for the two captured Germans. Indeed, both Steinmeier and German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) have deliberately used the case of Ostoff to argue for self-censorship on the part of the German press.

The kidnapping and threats to kill Rene Bräunlich and Thomas Nitzschke by a hitherto-unknown Iraqi insurgent group are despicable and cowardly acts that only serve to undermine the bonds between working people in Germany and Iraq. At the same time, it is clear that through its underhanded support for the illegal US war and occupation, it is the German government itself that has created the conditions whereby ordinary Germans working abroad are now being put at risk of life and limb.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact