

Berlin and Strasbourg protests oppose the EU-Bolkestein Directive

Our correspondents
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Around 40,000 demonstrated in Berlin on Saturday against the European Union-Bolkestein Directive. The directive is aimed at opening up European services to the ravages of the free market and will invariably lead to massive job losses and welfare cuts. A demonstration of about 15,000 also took place in Strasbourg, France, the seat of the European parliament. Supporters of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit-PSG (Socialist Equality Party) distributed a leaflet at the protests titled “The Bolkestein Directive: The struggle against European Union attacks requires a socialist perspective”.

Taking part in the Berlin demonstration was the central German Confederation of Trade Unions (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund—DGB) together with various environmental organisations, as well as the SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Greens, the Left Party and the Social Committee (CDA) of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union). The demonstration was held under the slogan “Europe, yes—social dumping no!”

Those participating in the protest included the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, and representatives of individual trade unions, alongside various leading politicians such as the government’s minister for developmental aid, Heidemarie Wieczorek Zeul, and the vice-president of the German parliament (Bundestag), Wolfgang Thierse—both of the SPD—as well as Reinhold Bütikofer, the Green chairman, and Renate Künast, the leader of the Green parliamentary group.

Last week, the social democratic parliamentary group in the European parliament had already declared it was willing to agree to the guidelines under certain conditions. These conditions had been negotiated by representatives of the group in a working committee of the European parliament together with members of the conservative EVP parliamentary group (European People’s Party). The parliament is expected to adopt this compromise on Tuesday with the votes of both parliamentary groups.

In fact, this compromise differs only insignificantly from the original draft. Some formulations have been changed and partly watered down. For example, the conservative Austrian deputy Othmar Karas explained to the daily paper *Standard* that with regard to one of the most disputed points, “the term ‘country of origin’ is no longer used, but the basic principle remains.”

The “compromise” is supported not only by the European social democrats and the German government, but also by the trade unions. On the demonstration, Sommer expressed “particular thanks” for the progress that had been made. The draft, he said, corresponded to many of the demands he had made and should be passed. He regarded the demonstration on Saturday as necessary to ensure that the compromise is actually agreed on Tuesday, and not delayed or prevented by the

EVP or the commission.

The organisers of the protest endeavoured, therefore, to limit the demands of the demonstration to rejection of the Bolkestein Directive and/or their implementation in a slightly changed form—any broader issues were excluded. The European Union and its institutions, which for years have led the way in welfare and wage cuts, were paraded as guarantors of progress. Martin Rocholl, speaking on behalf of the environment organisation BUND (Federation) and the anti-globalisation movement Attac, explained in the closing speech that for him, “the European Union combined the hope for peace, more tolerance, more democracy, more social security, more consumer and environmental protection, and increased legal rights.”

In his own speech to the crowd, the head of the DGB made just a fleeting reference to the determined industrial action taken by AEG workers in Nuremberg over past weeks and the fact that Germany is currently experiencing its biggest public service workers strike for the last 14 years. Also, just one day before the demonstration, Volkswagen had announced plans for the loss of 20,000 jobs in Germany. This fact was passed over in silence by Sommer.

In a situation where the German grand coalition government (SPD-CDU and the Christian Social Union) plans sweeping attacks on the population, numerous companies have announced job cuts, and Germany is being prepared to conduct new wars, the trade unions organised a thoroughly toothless protest on Saturday against the EU directive, with which they are in agreement. As they have done so often in the past, the trade unions passed out whistles and allowed the crowd to exercise their lungs in an action cynically aimed at heading off and controlling widespread resistance to the social deterioration currently taking place in Germany.

During the past few years, opposition to social cuts developed on many occasions independently from the old parties and trade union organisations. One-and-a-half years ago in Germany, a protest movement came into being overnight that went on to organise mass demonstrations against the SPD-Green Party government’s anti-welfare policies. Then last year, in France and the Netherlands, a majority of the population voted down the European Union constitution, despite a massive campaign by the political establishment. At the same time, major labour disputes took place throughout Europe. There can be no doubt that the issue of the Bolkestein Directive has the potential to become a focus for further militant protests.

Instead, the DGB organised a protest for show. More than 30,000 of the 40,000 demonstrators were ferried to the demonstration from all over Germany in a fleet of 600 trade union buses. They came equipped with caps, flags and whistles for a rally in front of the

Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, where they were supplied with pop music and free soup. The demonstrators then marched to the Palace of the Republic, where the closing rally took place. Loud music dominated the rally, and hotdog stands far outnumbered those providing political literature.

In fact, the trade unions were hardly able to mobilise outside of their direct sphere of influence. In contrast to the demonstrations against welfare cuts held during past years, one amazingly met few members of organisations supporting the unemployed, ordinary workers or young people.

One exception was Thomas, a 25-year-old political science student from Potsdam. He had learned of the demonstration through the newspapers and attended the protest to campaign and encourage others to oppose neo-liberal policies. He considers the perspectives of the trade union to be unsuited to stop the Bolkestein Directive. “One will not be able to bring the government to act against the logic of global capitalism by demonstrations,” he said. “In order to break such a capitalist logic, we need an international perspective.”

Shortly after the beginning of the demonstration, those taking part rapidly dispersed, leaving only about 3,000 people who stayed to listen to the speeches.

Approximately 15,000 took part in the demonstration in Strasbourg, with large contingents from France, Germany and Belgium. Many of the participants were associated with such organisations such as Attac, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) from France, and the French Communist Party (PCF), as well as the German Maoist MLPD and a few groups of trade unionists.

While in Berlin leading trade unionists and cabinet members presented the minimal changes made to the Bolkestein Directive as a success and argued for the acceptance of the amended guidelines, speakers at the rally in Strasbourg rejected the past concessions as insufficient. Several speakers demanded the complete withdrawal of the directive.

However, none of them seriously and critically took up the role of the trade unions and social democrats. Nobody dared to make the simple point that the Bolkestein Directive represents a crucial element of European Union policy and that the struggle against it requires a socialist perspective that is not just directed against individual aspects of EU policies, but challenges their capitalist foundations.

In this sense, Peter Grottian, a political science professor from Berlin, warned against accepting any compromise to the Bolkestein Directive and declared: “One cannot reform Bolkestein, only abolish it!” His entire perspective, however, was limited to organising a “boycott of products and services” against the “neo-liberal policy of the European Union.”

The opportunist orientation of the demonstration became even clearer when Francis Wurtz, a prominent member of the French Communist Party and chairman of the European parliamentary group United European Left/Northern Green Lefts, took over the microphone. “We have forced the supporters of the directive onto the defensive. Many areas have already been excluded. Let us not underestimate these changes, we have achieved a lot.” He continued, “The radical free-market character of the entire guidelines” remains to a large extent unaffected by the changes and there are “absolutely no guarantees that these concessions will last,” but the “alliance of progressive forces” has already won important successes.

Francis Wurtz’s speech made clear that, in essence, organisers of the Strasbourg demonstration were using radical words in an effort to channel increasing resistance against the reactionary policies of

Brussels bureaucrats behind the trade unions and Social Democrats, who themselves are arguing strongly for the passage of the directive.

The passage from the leaflet distributed by supporters of the PSG and the WWSWS to the demonstration in both German and French stressed: “The most important issue confronting demonstrators in Berlin and Strasbourg is the necessity of adopting a socialist perspective. The protests must be made the starting point of a broad political mobilisation in which the broad masses of the population in Europe challenge the EU authorities in Brussels and their backers in the major corporations and governments, from the standpoint of a fight for the profound reorganisation of society to ensure that the needs of the population are placed above profit interests.”

A number of discussions took place over these issues with participants on the demonstration. Jean Louis is a member of the French CGT trade union in Roissy near Paris and is also active in the Attac movement. He had come to the demonstration with two colleagues.

“I prefer to demonstrate here in Strasbourg instead of on Tuesday with the European trade union federation [EGB] because the federation called for a ‘yes’ vote in the European Union referendum [on the European constitution]. I do not agree with the stance of the EGB and prefer to demonstrate today with other social movements against Bolkestein.

“ ‘No’ to Bolkestein is a continuation of the rejection of the constitution referendum that took place on May 29. Thus, we are sure that one can find today throughout the shipyards in France—for example, in Saint Nazaire on the Atlantic coast or at Alstom, where low-wage labour and subcontractors are used on a huge scale.”

When questioned on the role of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), which is closely affiliated with the PCF, Jean Louis reported on the preparations for the upcoming trade union congress in April, which is expected to be dominated by violent disputes.

“We have leaders that one has to keep in check,” he said. “There are people in the CGT who should be replaced: Bernard Thibault [general secretary], but, in particular, Jean Christophe Le Guigou [national secretary, with responsibility for economic questions]. They voted ‘yes’ in the referendum, taking Bolkestein into account and without addressing the problems of declining energy reserves and environmental issues.”



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