

Germany: Mass demonstrations against social and welfare cuts

By our reporters
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An estimated 200,000 workers, their families and young people took to the streets in five major German cities (Berlin, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Dortmund and Munich) Saturday to protest against the social and welfare cuts imposed by the previous Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green Party government and the current grand coalition government of the conservative parties—Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)—and the SPD.

The demonstrations were called by the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB). Union members turned out to express their anger and frustration with the policies of the current government and its predecessor, which have led to unprecedented levels of social inequality.

The speeches made by leading trade union functionaries stood in stark contrast to their record of day-to-day collaboration with the government. Many recent contracts that have resulted in factory closures, job losses, cuts in wages and attacks on working conditions bear the signatures of the very same union leaders who denounced welfare cuts, unemployment and the growing population of “working poor” at Saturday’s demonstrations.

The cynicism of the union officials was underscored by their failure to organise a single protest in an eastern German city, where unemployment and poverty are nearly double the levels in the former West Germany. Ignored by the union bureaucrats, many workers from the east nevertheless made the trip to Berlin to express their disgust and anger with government policy, as well as the pernicious role played by the unions themselves.

Some 60,000 gathered in the German capital of Berlin, carrying placards and banners protesting government policies that have led to a deterioration of living conditions for millions of German citizens. Many placards took up specific issues, denouncing government attacks on a wide range of social issues, such as education (increased class sizes and a lack of teachers), the decline

in apprenticeships for young people, and pensions cuts (including plans put forward by the SPD to increase the average retirement age to 67). Drawing attention to the growth of poverty in Germany and the rise in the number of “working poor,” many demonstrators wore jerseys bearing the slogan “Employed, but Poor.”

The background to the demonstration was the public discussion last week of the so-called underclass in Germany. Figures released in connection with an official report revealed wide levels of poverty throughout the country, including up to 25 percent of all citizens living in the former East Germany). Other statistics pointed to growing economic insecurity and increasing disillusionment with all of the official political parties.

The single measure that has contributed the most to the deterioration of living standards is the Hartz IV anti-welfare law implemented by the former SPD-Green government. While union leaders at the demonstrations drew attention to the growing social divisions in Germany and the attendant threat to democracy, they avoided any mention of their own role in developing and implementing the Hartz IV law.

The main speaker at the rally held in the city of Dortmund was Jürgen Peters, the head of the IG Metall union, the largest union in Germany and one of the largest in the world. Speaking in the former iron and steel centre of the Ruhr, Peters criticised the policies of the current grand coalition, but made no mention of his own role in the implementation of anti-social policies. As the chairman of IG Metall and a leading member of the SPD, Peters sent leading officials of his union to participate in the Hartz Commission. Under the leadership of fellow SPD and IG Metall member Peter Hartz, the most draconian anti-welfare measures in the history of post-war Germany were developed on behalf of the SPD-Green government.

The main speaker in Berlin, Frank Bsirske, chairman of

the public services trade union Verdi and a leading member of the Green Party, underlined the hypocritical stance of the trade union bureaucracy. Bsirske denounced the growth of social inequality in German society, expressed in soaring profits and booming salaries for corporate managers and bankers on the one hand, and increasing social misery on the other.

Social inequality, he said, was “not a demographic problem, but a social time bomb,” which had to be “defused.” He attacked government proposals to increase the value-added tax, which he said would endanger Germany’s economic recovery, demanded a minimum wage, and called for a fairer distribution of the tax burden. In an ugly and xenophobic swipe at eastern European workers, Bsirske denounced Polish workers who, he said, endanger the prospects for German workers and are prepared to work for 1 euro per hour in the state of Rhineland.

While criticising the growth of poverty and the ranks of the “working poor” in Germany, Bsirske neglected to mention the part he has personally played in assisting such a development. It was Bsirske who collaborated with Berlin Economics Senator Harald Wolf to impose a 10 percent wage cut on Berlin transport workers; and just this year, his Verdi union played the role of strike-breaker in a series of strikes by doctors and health service workers. Moreover, for the seven years of the SPD-Green government, Verdi played a crucial role in suppressing opposition to that government’s anti-welfare legislation.

On a number of occasions, Bsirske’s speech was interrupted by shouts and calls from a delegation of workers who are currently on strike in Berlin, and who stood with their banners near the podium at the front of the crowd. Workers from the Bosch Siemens factory in Berlin cried out, “We want to strike!” Two thirds of the workforce recently voted to continue strike action at their factory to defend jobs, although their union leaders are advising a return to work.

In Stuttgart, the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, warned of the long-term consequences for democracy in Germany arising from the growth of social inequality, and declared, “The election victories for the neo-Nazis, growing political disenchantment, the turn away from the big people’s parties, the fact that fewer and fewer people are taking part in elections should be a warning, and not just for us.”

When Sommer (an SPD member since 1981) speaks of a “warning, and not just for us,” he is advising German ruling and business circles that they cannot afford to

exclude the unions from the elaboration of future policy. Sommer went on to criticise the plans of Vice Chancellor Franz Müntefering (SPD) to raise the retirement age, and called for an end to the politics of ultimatums that characterised the latter stages of the SPD-Green government of Gerhard Schröder.

Two years ago, widespread demonstrations against Hartz IV and other social and welfare cuts played a major role in the decision of then-chancellor Schröder to call early elections so as to clear the way for a government better able to carry through his big business agenda. Significantly, the wave of protests and demonstrations against Hartz IV in 2003 and 2004 were organised independently of the unions.

This time around, the union leaders are sending a clear signal to the grand coalition government. At Saturday’s demonstrations, they spoke above the heads of the protesters to address the most influential economic and political circles of the German bourgeoisie. “For your own good, take us on board, and we will do our best to prevent a social upheaval.” Such was the subtext of the speeches from the podium.

And the message was received. Amongst those warmly applauding the speeches in Berlin were the Left Party-Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) finance senator in Berlin, Harald Wolf, and the chairman of the Left Party-PDS, Lothar Bisky. In the front row at the rally in Frankfurt was the former chairman of IG Metall, Franz Steinkühler, who initiated the turn to the right by the union in the 1980s. Forced to quit the union in 1993 following accusations of insider trading, Steinkühler is active today as a property and management consultant.

Teams of Socialist Equality Party members and supporters intervened at many of the rallies, distributing thousands of copies of the statement, “Fight against job and welfare cuts requires an international socialist perspective”, which was warmly received by demonstrators. Dozens of signatures were collected in support of the call by the SEP of Sri Lanka for an investigation into the murder of SEP supporter Sivaparagasam Mariyadas.



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