

Day of action in Hamburg

Airbus union leaders turn rally over to right-wing politicians

Our reporters
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Some 20,000 turned out Friday March 16 for the demonstration against job cuts at Airbus in Hamburg. They packed the Spielbudenplatz in the centre of the city, with many having travelled from other Airbus factories in the cities of Bremen, Buxtehude, Laupheim, Stade and Varel. In addition, delegations came from subsidiary industries, and a large number of young people were also in attendance. Entire school classes had been given the day off, and some held signs reading, “My dad should keep his job” and “Who is thinking of our future?”

A majority of those demonstrating had taken part in spontaneous strikes and protest actions two weeks ago, as workers reacted to the news of plans by the Airbus company to cut 10,000 jobs. With all the company’s factories located in France, Germany, England and Spain, the proposal for a joint European protest demonstration and rally in Brussels of all those affected received widespread support.

However, just a few days before this joint action was due to take place, it was called off by the trade unions. Instead, under the heading “European day of action,” national rallies and meetings were organised at which chauvinist sentiments were encouraged.

In Hamburg, the trade union had invited three prominent politicians from the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to serve as the main speakers at the demonstration: Lower Saxony’s Prime Minister Christian Wulff, Prime Minister Günther Öttinger of Baden-Württemberg, and Ole von Beust, the mayor of Hamburg. In the end, von Beust was unable to attend and was replaced by his finance senator, Ulrich Nussbaum.

Until now, it has been quite rare for leading CDU politicians to appear at large trade union rallies, and certainly not as the main speakers. When they sought to address rallies in the past, they were often met with a hostile reception. The constant attacks carried out by the CDU on social gains and democratic rights are well known and despised. This time, the chairman of the Airbus works council, Rüdiger Lütjen, introduced the CDU politicians with effusive friendliness, thanked them for coming, and called for “big applause” from the audience—which in

reality turned out to be somewhat restrained.

The most avid nationalist speech was made by state Prime Minister Öttinger. He began with the words, “We are fighting for Airbus in Germany.” All of the German plants had to remain and defended in the framework of the company, he said. Nobody had convinced him so far that “the problems can be solved by selling off the factories.” It was impermissible “that problems, which were made by the management, should be shifted onto workers.”

“It is not the fault of the workers. I want to expressly state my respect here for their efforts,” Öttinger declared, although he is a man with a reputation for demanding deeper welfare cuts at every opportunity, declaring them the necessary price for international competitiveness. High-level technology presupposes highly qualified specialists, he stressed, declaring: “Where in the field of high-level technology, if not here, should Germany lead and defend its leading worldwide position?”

Europe must shake itself up in order to take on American competition. “The Americans buy Boeing,” everyone knows that. Europe must undertake great efforts “in order to remain loyal (to Germany) as a centre for technology and science.” That is also part of the “business concept of EADS and Airbus.”

Following a decision by DaimlerChrysler to sell part of its shares in the company, a number of German states with Airbus plants decided to buy shares “in order to prevent the Russians or a hedge-fund acquiring them.” Thus, the states ensured that the German share of Airbus was not minimised, enabling the German partner “to remain on level footing with France.”

Speaking before Öttinger, the prime minister of Lower Saxony, Christian Wulff had also praised the “Airbus success story.” The “technological competence” lay to a large extent in Germany and must remain there. He saw the immediate “danger of the loss of technological know-how,” as the consequence of the dividing up and selling off the factories. Through cooperation between the works councils and management, it was entirely possible to solve the problems within the framework of the company. “I know very capable works councils that have made very intelligent suggestions,”

Wulff stressed.

There had to be “very close cooperation between works councils, management and politics,” he demanded. Then the problems could be solved, and the market share for Airbus would increase considerably. The eyes of the world are now already on Europe, and therefore, cooperation in Europe must be intensified.

Wulff’s reference to the close cooperation of works councils and management refers to the Volkswagen Company, in which the state of Lower Saxony has its own stake. Only recently, and on the basis of precisely such cooperation, wages have been substantially cut and working conditions worsened. German Telekom also plans to outsource 55,000 jobs, employing its remaining workers under worse conditions. Now, Wulff has something similar in mind for Airbus.

The last to speak at the demonstration was finance senator Nussbaum. He summarised his remarks with the formula, “Airbus needs Germany and Germany needs Airbus”—a statement that was greeted with applause from those on the platform.

In order to mask the nationalist tone of the speeches, the chairman to the IG Metall union federation, Jürgen Peters, praised the virtues of European solidarity. “We will not allow ourselves to be split! We are only strong together! An attack on the workforce at one location is an attack on all, and will result in our joint resistance.” He repeated these and similar clichés in a number of variations—hollow phrases, which workers have heard endlessly.

Much more significant than all the words and promises of Peters was the fact that the trade union had turned over the platform to right-wing CDU politicians. This marks a further sharp lurch to the right by the trade unions, which are operating ever more openly as agents of the big corporations and Germany’s ruling grand coalition government.

Peter declared that this “great demonstration” would transmit a signal of unity and determination, but in fact, the rally sent a very different message. It showed that a transnational struggle to defend all jobs at all locations cannot be carried out in an alliance with the trade unions, but only on the basis of a struggle against them. The trade unions have aligned themselves with their respective national governments and company managements in a manner that is evident to all.

Contrary to the nationalist tirades of CDU and SPD politicians on the platform, workers at the demonstration made clear to our reporters that they saw the necessity of a joint struggle to defend all jobs in Germany, France, Spain and England.

“They can just do what they want with us if we allow ourselves to be divided,” remarked Björn F., who has worked on the Airbus production line in Hamburg since 1989.

His colleagues Dieter K. and Volker K. were of the same opinion. Both had worked for Airbus for more than 20 years. The Airbus “Power 8” restructuring program was aimed at

maximising profits for shareholders by making cuts at all Airbus factories. “The shareholders want to see profit,” the company says. Already, new time studies are repeatedly being introduced in order to ratchet up production levels. “Savings are being made everywhere, we are being pressured to work ever faster and if possible through our breaks,” the three men reported.

An employee from the finance department who had worked at Airbus for 27 years declared that the plans for the sale of some factories and outsourcing was aimed at imposing lower wages and costs, in order to pacify shareholders.

The fact that state CDU politicians, who are well known for their hostility to workers’ interests, could speak at the demonstration was a source of disquiet for some workers. An older worker declared that the politicians were probably fearful of joint action by the workers, and have therefore promised to assist the Airbus workers. Some workers, on the other hand, reacted positively to the appearance of the politicians. They hoped that intervention at the state level could help protect them against the worse excesses of management.

A discussion with several young Airbus workers at the end of the demonstration made clear the extent to which the workforce had been surprised by Airbus management’s unveiling of the “Power 8” plan. It appeared utterly paradoxical that a company with plenty of orders should, on its own initiative, endanger the smooth operation of the production process.

The young workers stressed that the sale of factories and outsourcing was breaking up a well-coordinated, highly qualified workforce, with inevitable negative consequences for the quality and safety of the airplanes. Formerly, workers were asked to make sacrifices for the sake of improving and increasing productivity. Now, however, apart from some initial production difficulties with the A 380 model, everything was running smoothly.

Many workers were not only anxious about their own future but angry over the breaking up of an ultramodern company.



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