

Germany: Union leader warns of social unrest

Dietmar Henning
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The chairman of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Michael Sommer, warned recently in several interviews that the country faces “social unrest”. If the continuing economic crisis leads to mass redundancies, this will be seen as a “declaration of war on workers and the trade unions”, he told Nordwest-Zeitung. “Then I cannot exclude it coming to social unrest in Germany too”.

He told broadcaster ARD that the economic crisis was not only affecting “the margins of society, but also the core groups of blue and white collar workers and small businesses”. The danger of the crisis leading to a social radicalization should not be underestimated he said. Current forecasts of an economic decline of “up to 6 percent” are comparable to the figures from the economic crisis of 1930-32, he said, which had “well-known consequences”. This was an allusion to the collapse of the Weimar Republic. It was possible, according to Sommer, that people would turn away from politics or become radicalized; therefore “we have to do everything in order to secure jobs”.

Sommer’s warnings are addressed to the employers’ associations and the government, with whom the unions and Sommer have been cooperating in order to shift the effects of the economic crisis onto the back of working people. On Wednesday they met again in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s office for a so-called “crisis summit”.

Sommer’s interviews, which he gave before and after this meeting, were a signal to the government and the employers’ associations that the ability of the trade unions to keep the unrest in the factories under control was limited. They were an appeal to deepen collaboration with the unions.

On Thursday, Sommer told rbb Inforadio that the first measures to stabilize the economy, which had been made with the help of the unions, were already showing

their effect; and he now expects business to play its part. If this did not happen, he fears there could be social unrest. “You know how people react if they lose their means of existence”.

A few days earlier, an editorial in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, headlined “The third phase of the crisis”, had warned that in view of “ever worsening economic data” and “gloomy forecasts”, Germans were losing their “composure”. The article went on to say that “the peace will soon be over”, since “the crisis will reach its third phase in the coming months: the social security system will start to totter.” This would have an even greater effect on people than the financial and economic crisis.

On Thursday morning, as Sommer’s words were being commented upon in the media, several thousand employees of tire manufacturer Continental had gathered at the main railway station in Hanover to welcome their French colleagues, who had travelled on a special train from Clairoix in northern France. The German and French workers then marched together to the Congress Centre, to demonstrate against the planned plant closures in both countries outside the Continental general meeting.

The previous evening, furious Continental workers in Clairoix smashed the windows of the reception hall at the French plant and destroyed furniture, after they had learnt that a court had thrown out their legal case against the plant closure. In southern France, at the beginning of the week, the ninth case in 5 weeks of workers taking senior management figures hostage in so-called “boss-nappings” had come to an end.

DGB leader Sommer and other union leaders fear that the resistance of the French workers could increasingly spread to Germany.

At the crisis summit in the chancellery, the DGB chair had stressed the trade unions’ “sense of responsibility”. The unions had always proven their

readiness in the past to keep social conflicts under control and uphold bourgeois order. Without the active support of the unions, the Social Democratic Party-Green Party federal government under Gerhard Schröder would not have been able to implement the labour and welfare reforms contained in Agenda 2010 and the Hartz laws. Nor could the grand coalition under Merkel and Müntefering have raised the retirement age to 67 years and pushed through further far-reaching social cuts.

The unions are closely linked with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and form part of a power cartel comprising big business and politics. For 28 years, Sommer has been an SPD member and regularly participates in meetings of the party's governing bodies. At the same time, most of the 45 SPD executive committee members are also union members.

Furthermore, many union officials also sit on the supervisory boards of the large corporations where they function as co-managers, working hand in hand with the top executives. In many cases the "workers' representatives" agree to so-called restructuring measures, knowing that this means substantial job cuts, lower wages and a serious worsening of conditions for the workforce.

The latest example of this common practice is the supervisory board of ThyssenKrupp in Duisburg. With the votes of the trade unions, the board agreed the most radical restructuring of the company since the fusion of the two steel corporations 10 years ago. The board of directors, the works council and IG Metall union all agreed that in addition to the existing cuts amounting to one billion euros, additional savings measures of €500 million, predominantly in wages and social costs, would be implemented.

The policy of social partnership and union participation in leading company bodies (*mitbestimmung*), which is highly developed and legally enshrined in Germany more than any other country, has played an important role over the past decades in subduing the class struggle and keeping social conflicts under control.

The international financial and economic crisis has undermined this policy in two different regards: first, the rapid development of the worldwide recession has had a massive impact on Germany's export industries. The dramatic rise in short-time working over the past

weeks is no longer enough to offset this. In many factories, but also in administrative bodies and in the public sector, mass redundancies on a scale never seen before are being prepared. The union policy of concessions and compromises is encouraging the corporations to make ever harsher attacks.

Second, the class character of society is becoming clearly visible. The same politicians, who until recently said that the coffers were empty are now making hundreds of billions of euros available to rescue the banks and speculators. Managers responsible for the bankruptcy of their failed enterprises receive redundancy packages and severance payments worth millions. They insist that their own contracts be honoured, while cancelling the contracts of thousands of workers with the stroke of a pen.

DGB chief Sommer's warning of social unrest is addressed to the ruling elite. It is not only a call for closer collaboration with the trade unions, but is also an appeal to the government and state to prepare for big class battles.



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