

German trade union boss to celebrate birthday in the chancellery

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It is often the less spectacular news that provides an insight into social developments. Such is the press report that Berthold Huber, the chairman of Europe's biggest trade union, IG Metall (IGM), will celebrate his 60th birthday in the German chancellery on March 17 following a personal invitation by the German head of government.

One can only congratulate Huber; the setting is entirely appropriate. Sitting alongside birthday boy Huber at the party will be the chancellor herself, Angela Merkel, the president of the German Employers' Association, Martin Kannegger, the head of Siemens, Peter Löscher, and the boss of Volkswagen, Martin Winterkorn.

According to a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, other guests will include the heads of works councils from a number of large concerns. The paper notes that the guest list will include "Merkel's absolute favourite among the workers' delegates: Klaus Franz from Opel. Even Uwe Hück of Porsche is coming."

The whole affair provides an important pedagogical lesson for the workers' movement. It makes absolutely clear on which side the trade unions stand and the extent to which their cooperation with the government and state has already developed. Huber's birthday party has a symbolic character and is confirmation of the ever-clearer transformation of the trade unions into organs of the state.

About 70 years ago, just a few days before his murder, Leon Trotsky wrote "Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay." It begins with the words: "There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organisations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power."

The fact that this tendency towards merger with the

state characterises all forms of union organisations, irrespective of whether they are so-called apolitical, social-democratic, "communist" or anarchist, makes clear that the problem does not lie in the behaviour of individual functionaries.

The economy is controlled by monopolies that cooperate closely with the state. Under these conditions in the past, all the trade unions could do was exploit the rivalry between different companies. However, now, as Trotsky wrote, "They have to confront a centralised capitalist adversary, intimately bound up with state power. Hence flows the need of the trade unions—insofar as they remain on reformist positions, i.e., on positions of adapting themselves to private property—to adapt themselves to the capitalist state and to contend for its cooperation."

Since writing these lines, many political organisations and groupings have sought to disprove Trotsky's analysis. In the post-war period, when the trade unions were able to obtain some wage increases and social improvements for a certain period, such organisations proclaimed that the unions could play a progressive role and even went so far as to maintain that social improvements and progress towards socialism could only be attained by the trade unions.

Up until the present day, social democrats, Stalinists and Pabloites of all shades reject any fundamental criticism of the trade unions and seek to subordinate the working class to the bureaucratic union apparatuses.

Huber's birthday party in the chancellery helps dispel such an opportunist viewpoint. Huber effusively thanked the chancellor for her invitation in a letter that begins "Dear Madam Chancellor." The invitation came in the wake of the contract agreed by IGM functionaries just a few weeks ago in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The contract is due to run for two

years, involves real wage cuts for employees and confirms that the acquiescence of the union was aimed at covering the flanks of the government.

The savings programme in Greece dictated by the European Union is the prelude for major attacks on the working class throughout Europe; and with popular resistance growing, IGM, Verdi and the other German trade unions seek to hold back and mollify workers by agreeing to contracts with long running times. Now, Huber and other works councils leaders have been rewarded for extending this olive branch to the government.

Workers should welcome the clarification provided by Huber's invitation to the chancellery and must prepare for the fact that in the coming class struggles the trade unions and works councils will operate even more fiercely as the enforcers of the government agenda. This development makes ever more urgent the construction of factory committees that systematically oppose the trade unions and works councils and their defence of government policy.



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