

Germany: Union leader warns of working class radicalisation

Our correspondent
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Although the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections are only days away, just 2,000 or 3,000 came to the main demonstration held by the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) on May 1. These numbers say a lot about the state of an organisation that in the 1970s could mobilise tens of thousands.

Clearly, the vast majority of blue- and white-collar workers, and the 6.3 million DGB members, do not expect anything more from a trade union that played a key role in recent years in enforcing welfare cuts and the destruction of jobs and pushing through cuts in real wages. Half of the 11.8 million members of trade unions affiliated to the DGB in 1990 have since turned their backs on the unions.

The audience at the May Day rally mainly comprised older people, union officials and representatives of the parties that will be cooperating closely with the DGB in the next round of social cuts. This was evidenced by the many flags on display of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party.

The speech of the DGB chairman, Michael Sommer, was clearly adapted to this audience. While many workers and welfare recipients clench their teeth and boil with rage at the orgy of enrichment carried out by the banks, Sommer's contribution was a mixture of impotent whining and entreaties to the ruling class, to whom he is offering his services in the suppression of social conflicts.

The DGB statement calling for this year's May Day demonstrations was entitled "We are advancing! Good work, just wages, a strong welfare state". The statement was full of platitudes and demagoguery, but not a word was mentioned about the debt crisis in Greece and other EU countries, and the dramatic attacks against Greek workers being instigated by the EU Commission, the IMF and the German government.

In his speech, Sommer merely mentioned the events in Greece in passing. In the written version of the speech distributed to the press beforehand, Greece was not mentioned at all. When he spoke, the DGB head did mention briefly that there were also demonstrations taking place in Athens and in Istanbul, Turkey. He did not, however, express a single word of solidarity with the Greek workers who face losing 30 percent of their income at once under the recent proposed austerity package.

In fact, the DGB stands fully behind these austerity measures, which came about not least as a result of massive pressure from the German government. The SPD, the Greens and the Left Party have already announced that they will support the Merkel government when it comes to the vote on the loans to Greece in the Bundestag (parliament).

Sommer also knows that the Greek austerity measures are only the prelude to similar measures across Europe—including Germany—with which the huge holes in public finances caused by the bank rescue packages are to be filled at the expense of working people. He left no doubt that the crisis is far from over, and that thousands of jobs are threatened: "Let us not deceive ourselves that this crisis is far from over. And the next one is coming round the corner. And we won't be able to get a grip on that one with bank rescue packages, stimulus packages, car scrappage schemes and labour market policies."

Sommer's response to the worsening of the crisis is to seek an even closer alliance with government and employers' associations. Again and again in his speech, he stressed the need for social partnership and "*mitbestimmung*" (union-management co-determination). Especially in the past two years, the German system of co-determination has proved that it

was helpful in addressing the crisis, he said.

This was a reference to the crucial role of the trade unions, which have contributed greatly to shifting the burden of the crisis onto the backs of the population and to prevent an independent political offensive of the working class. Union officials have signed off on hundreds of workplace agreements, which have resulted in job cuts and massive wage losses.

This year, the IG Metall, IG Bergbau and IG Chemie unions have agreed to pay freezes, thus speeding up the decline in real wages that has been driven through for years by low premium rates, extended contracts and the increasing use of temporary work, temporary contracts and the low-wage sector. At auto manufacturer Opel, IG Metall and the works council are collaborating closely with GM in pushing through a reduction of 10,000 jobs and wage cuts of €265 million across Europe.

Sommer warned politicians and big business that the trade unions could lose control if they face another round of social attacks. “And because we cannot afford a new crisis, because we could not control a second crisis of this kind, because it would ultimately threaten peace and democracy, we cannot remain silent,” he said.

In his speech, Sommer employed radical phraseology to attack the speculators, and emphasised the need for a strong welfare state. His real message was that the DGB and government must work closely together to suppress resistance in the working class.

In this, Sommer is ready to cooperate with any political coalition that emerges after the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections on May 9. Neither in his May Day speech nor in an interview with the WAZ (*Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*) the same day, did he make a clear pronouncement about the election. He merely said that he thought there were many possible options: “Just think about a SPD-Green Party coalition, or a Christian Democratic-Green Party coalition, or even a grand coalition.”



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