

# German trade union congress closes ranks with employers and government

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Last weekend saw the start in Berlin of the 19th congress of the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB). The congress takes place every four years.

The DGB chairman Michael Sommer used the congress to firm up the already close collaboration between the unions, government and employers. With Europe in the grip of its worst economic crisis for decades and the German government preparing to introduce drastic austerity measures the DGB sees its task in suffocating any popular resistance and securing social peace.

In his inaugural address on Sunday before 400 delegates and over 600 guests from home and abroad, Sommer praised the work carried out by the trade unions and work councils in the financial and economic crisis. The coordinated activities of work councils and trade unions made clear, he said: “A social democracy cannot exist without a strong, free, independent, and decisive trade union movement.”

Turning to the president of the German employers’ association, Dieter Hundt, who sat in the audience, Sommer praised the “fine way” in which companies and trade unions had tackled the first two years of the financial and economic crisis: “The cooperation between work councils and management, our cooperation, for example, over the short-time working scheme, the cooperation between both sides on contract agreements helped cushion the crisis and profited both of us.” At the same time he reminded the employers’ president not to ignore the services of the trade unions in future. “I can only advise you: Do not forget that,” he stressed.

The cooperation praised by Sommer certainly helped the companies as well as the trade unions—but brought absolutely no benefits for ordinary workers. The short-time working scheme resulted in high losses of income

for workers, while the companies were able to profit from subsidies from the federal unemployment insurance scheme. Within the framework of their “cooperation between the contract parties”, the country’s two largest industrial trade unions, IG Metall (IGM) and IG Bau (IGBCE), abstained for the first time in years from making a wage claim in 2010. At Opel autos and many other companies the trade unions and work councils oversaw and implemented the destruction of thousands of jobs, together with substantial wage reductions for those remaining.

Also of note was the appearance of Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the first day of the congress. Her reception differed greatly from that of her predecessors. Formerly heads of government addressing the congress would invariably have been greeted with cat-calls and booing when they announced “inevitable” cuts and savings plans. This was part of a ritual where trade union leaders sought to mask their cooperation with the government. This time, however, the response by delegates was very different.

In her speech to the congress Merkel pointedly rejected a number of key demands of the DGB: a withdrawal of the plans for an increase in the retirement age to 67 and the so-called “debt brake” (the legal obligation to limit debt and radically slash public spending), the introduction of a financial transaction tax and a minimum wage. Nevertheless trade union leaders applauded her speech and, as the media reported, “chuckled over humorous remarks made by Merkel”.

Merkel made clear that massive cuts would be made in the coming years. “Very hard years lie ahead of us”, she declared. The trade union leaders applauded because they are of the same opinion. “Hard times are coming”, was the comment by the DGB executive

member Claus Matecki (IGM).

DGB leader Sommer stressed his own close relationship with Merkel. Already in January he had told Spiegel Online: “Frau Merkel has learnt one thing out of the crisis—it is better to cooperate with the trade unions than govern against them.”

At the congress Sommer once again underlined his good relationship with the chancellor. “We have undergone a fundamental joint experience, which we would have preferred to have avoided”, declared the DGB leader. This fundamental joint experience led, however, to an improved spirit of mutual confidence. “There are more forces intent on ensuring social equilibrium and allowing thereby the trade unions to play an important role”, he said.

This is precisely what Sommer and all of the assembled trade unionists are calling for: an important role in shifting the burden of the economic crisis onto the population. Otherwise, Sommer threatened, “we run the risk of heading into the middle of a state and social crisis—with inestimable consequences for democracy, stability and social peace”.

A “new order” is necessary, Sommer continued—whereby the stress was on “order”. He and the DGB want to play their role in creating such a new order.

Workers should take warning. The latest congress graphically confirmed that trade unions have long since given up the role of representing the interests of workers. They see themselves as guarantors of the existing capitalist order. Their warnings of social division are aimed at demonstrating that the services of the trade unions are vital for defending the existing order.

Most workers realize this. The DGB has lost vast numbers of members during Sommer’s period in office. Currently the eight remaining DGB trade unions have a combined membership of 6.3 million. In 1991 membership stood at 11.8 million, i.e., nearly twice as many. The trade unions have reacted to every crisis and slump in membership with further moves to the right.

Sommer personifies this process, but this did not prevent delegates from re-electing him to his post for a third term with a 94 percent majority. Only one other DGB chairman, Heinz Oskar Vetter (1969-1982), has occupied the post for such a long time.

Before and during the congress Sommer was at the

heart of a very favorable media public relations offensive. Much was reported on his difficult childhood as an illegitimate son of a single parent, which led him later to campaign on behalf of “the underdog”. More significant for his socialization, however, was no doubt his post-school career, which was far removed from the fate of the underdog.

Sommer studied politics at the free University of Berlin until 1980, in part with the help of a scholarship from the trade union Hans Böckler foundation. For three years of his studies Sommer was a member of the university group of the West Berlin organisation that was affiliated to the Stalinist ruling party of former East Germany.

In holiday Sommer found work at the post office and joined the German post office trade union DPG—the start of his trade union career. Then in 1981 Sommer joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and began full-time work for the trade unions. Following the merger of the DPG into the Verdi trade union in 2001 Sommer became the deputy chairman of the new service industry union. In May 2002 he was then elected to the chairmanship of the DGB.

Sommer is an enthusiastic advocate of the policy of class cooperation that he advances not only in Germany, but internationally as well. A total of 148 union officials from all over the world attended the DGB congress in Berlin. At the end of June, Sommer plans to stand in Vancouver, Canada as a candidate for the post of president of the international trade union federation.

Under conditions where the German government is insisting that austerity programs and huge attacks on the living standards of the working class be implemented across Europe, Sommer and his colleagues are intent on transforming the trade unions into powerful organs of the government in order to diffuse or break the resistance against the coming attacks.



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