

# Trade union federation works hand in glove with German government

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*The following statement was distributed by the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit) at the protests organized in Germany last weekend as part of the DGB's "hot autumn" events. (See "German unions' 'hot autumn' protests seek to demobilize workers")*

This autumn's round of protests from the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) is an attempt to distract public attention from the close cooperation of DGB officials with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative government.

The DGB has summoned members to various events under the slogan—"the hot autumn of 2010". Apart from a core of committed supporters and works council representatives, whose office required their attendance, very few workers have so far participated in the demonstrations and rallies. A serious mobilisation of factories and offices is, in fact, not intended. Instead, the hyped-up media events serve merely as a backdrop for top trade union officials to indulge in seemingly radical phrase-mongering.

Last week, DGB President Michael Sommer told several thousand union activists that he had had enough. "This government is leading our country further and further into a situation of social instability," Sommer complained. There was no more child allowance money for Hartz IV (unemployment benefits) recipients, he said, but instead big handouts for the wealthy and business corporations. Chairmen of the various unions adopted a similar tone. Frank Bsirske, head of the Verdi public servant union, even called for a general strike.

The union bureaucrats seem to believe no one remembers that they themselves worked in close cooperation with the Merkel government to prepare and plan social attacks on the working class.

In May, Sommer welcomed the chancellor to the DGB's annual conference and praised the close cooperation between her and the union. Although Merkel confronted the 400 assembled officials to insist on raising the retirement age to 67, spoke out against a minimum wage and announced further deep cuts in social spending, Sommer later said:

"Mrs. Merkel has definitely learned one thing in this crisis: it's better to work with the unions, than to govern against them."

A few weeks earlier, the IG Metall engineering union boss, Berthold Huber, had celebrated his 60th birthday at the Berlin chancellery. In addition to Huber and the chancellor, the birthday banquet was also attended by the president of the employers' association, Martin Kannegiesser, Siemens CEO Peter Löscher, and Volkswagen CEO Martin Winterkorn.

Many workers regard this camaraderie between the unions and the government with disgust. But more needs to be done than simply giving the trade union bureaucracy the cold shoulder. It is necessary to draw the political lessons.

Workers pay a high price for the unions' cooperation with the government. While production growth rates are again rising and corporate profits soaring, an industrial worker earns less today than a decade ago, despite increasing work stress. The reason for this is the much-vaunted "wage restraint" policy of the trade unions, which has ensured that unit labour costs in Germany over the last 10 years have increased more slowly than in any other European country.

Pension entitlements are declining and health costs are rising, although the service is getting worse. The huge deficits in the state coffers resulting from the billions in handouts for the banks are responsible for this. The DGB is also responsible. It fully supported the government's €500 billion bank rescue programme, thereby assisting in the drawing up of the latest cost-cutting measures.

Even worse than the material are the political consequences of this class collaboration. The DGB and the government are systematically attempting to divide the working class. While the core workforce in the major firms was shielded from the worst of the economic crisis by the introduction of short-time work, the DGB supported the emergence of a huge low-wage sector, providing companies with a cheap and flexible labour pool that is largely deprived of any employment rights at all.

The basis for this was created by the Hartz laws of former

chancellor Gerhard Schröder's Social Democratic-Green government. Fear of slipping into the predicament of recipients of the miserly Hartz IV unemployment allowance has greatly increased pressure on many to accept low-paid work, thereby contributing to a general lowering of wages. Entering employment for the first time, school and university graduates often have to slog along for years with only temporary work, or a fixed-term or part-time contract. They receive minimum wages and have no chance of starting a family.

It was no surprise that the author and namesake of these laws was Peter Hartz. As director of the Volkswagen Corporation, member of IG Metall and federal government commissioner, Hartz embodied the social partnership between business, unions and the government. Hartz was also the key figure in last year's VW scandal, which brought the outrageous corruption in the works council and trade union milieu to the attention of the general public.

Efforts to divide the working class are not confined to Germany. Without offering a word of criticism, the DGB unions have backed the European Union and the International Monetary Fund in their imposition of drastic austerity programmes on Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Romania and Hungary. Here the driving force is again the Merkel government, which is demanding a ruthless policy of fiscal consolidation throughout Europe.

When Greek workers protested against wage reductions of 30 percent and mass layoffs in the civil service, Germany's trade unions failed to offer even a gesture of solidarity. The same applies to the mass protests against the raising of the retirement age in France. In this respect, President Nicolas Sarkozy has only caught up with what was long ago achieved in Germany by the social democratic labour minister Franz Müntefering—with the support of the DGB.

Workers in Germany will also have to pay dearly for the splitting up of the European working class. The starvation wages now being enforced on Greek and Spanish workers with the tacit support of the DGB will tomorrow serve as a benchmark for wages and working conditions in Germany. The unions will then agree to a new round of wage cuts on the grounds that they will be needed to maintain Germany's global competitiveness.

For their part, trade union officials receive princely salaries. A district head of IG Metall earns as much as a middle manager or a senior government official. Major corporations such as Volkswagen and Siemens maintain hundreds of full-time works council members who ensure industrial peace for the company, while earning far more than workers on an assembly line. The milieu of the unions and the works councils is extremely corrupt.

The answer, however, is not to hope for trade unions that

are somehow more honest or more militant. The transition of trade unions into the camp of the class enemy is a general phenomenon, observable in all countries. The perspective of trade unions inevitably leads to class collaboration. They see their task—at least in theory—as achieving concessions for their members in line with existing capitalist conditions. Therefore, they are interested in ensuring the smooth functioning of capitalism and the economic success of their “own” organisations. When the struggle for markets and profits intensifies in times of crisis, they inevitably ally themselves with “their” companies and “their” nation—even if doing so diametrically contradicts the interests of their own members.

The DGB is using its entire European apparatus to nip in the bud any united opposition from the European working class. Its autumn campaigns are an attempt to encourage the membership to let off steam in order to prevent the forging of solidarity with workers in other European countries. It thereby bolsters the federal government, which is promoting German corporate interests at home and abroad with increasing aggressiveness.

Governments across Europe are determined to shift the burden of the economic crisis onto the shoulders of the working class. The working class must confront this political challenge and prepare for a struggle for political power. It must resist the dogma of capitalism and fight for a socialist perspective. But this will not be possible without a rebellion against the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions.

It is necessary to establish action committees that take their cue from the historical tradition of workers' councils and cooperate with workers in other countries. Only in this way will it be possible to achieve an international unification and socialist regeneration of the labour movement.

We call on all readers to contact the editors of the *World Socialist Web Site* and take part in building the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, PSG), the German section of the Fourth International.



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