

Mass demonstrations in Germany call for an end to nuclear power

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An estimated quarter of a million people took to the streets in four German cities on Saturday to call for the closure of all nuclear power plants in the country. The demonstrations in Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne and Munich were organised by a wide range of environmental groups and supported by the main opposition parties in parliament—the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party. The German federation of trade unions (DGB) also put its name to the list of sponsors and its chairman was the main speaker at the rally following the march in Berlin.

In the German capital organisers of the demonstration had anticipated an attendance of around 50,000. In the event more than double that number took part. The final figure given by the organisers was 120,000, the biggest ever total for any comparable demonstration in Germany. The high turnout in Berlin and other cities (40,000 in Munich, 50,000 in Hamburg and 40,000 in Cologne) was a direct result of the recent catastrophe at the nuclear power station in Fukushima. Tens of thousands had turned to demonstrate their concern at the incident and express their solidarity with the victims of the Japanese nuclear disaster.

Many of the banners on the march in Berlin were critical of the policy of the German government. In the wake of the accident at the Fukushima plant, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for a three-month moratorium on extending the lifetimes of Germany's 17 nuclear reactors and the temporary closure of the oldest seven plants, pending safety checks.

Just a few days ago it came to light that the German

economic minister Rainer Brüderle of the free-market Free Democratic Party, or FDP, had given a speech to the business heads where he had declared that the government's anti-nuclear stance was merely electoral posturing and should not be regarded as a serious threat to the interests of the nuclear lobby in Germany.

Two crucial elections took place on Sunday in the German states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg. In both states the issue of the country's dependence on nuclear power was an important political issue which, in particular, benefited the electoral results of the Green Party.

Despite the fact that the government's position on nuclear power has been absolutely discredited, a number of the organisations supporting Saturday's demonstrations made appeals for the right-wing coalition government to come to its senses and "rethink its policy".

The demonstrations were characterised by a large degree of social and political heterogeneity. Wealthier layers of the middle class took part in the demonstrations alongside large numbers of younger people, many of whose jobs and careers are threatened by social decline and the recent financial crisis. Also in evidence along the route of the demonstration in Berlin were stands devoted to small business, their representatives eager to explain the advantages of various forms of alternative energy to nuclear power.

None of the organisations or political parties responsible for calling the protests made any attempt to draw out the broader implications of the crisis in Japan with the profit orientation of capitalist industry in general.

That the heterogeneous nature of the protests centred around a single demand—"An immediate end to all forms of nuclear power"—also meant that no serious

attempt was made to address the political record of those political parties that had thrown their weight behind the demonstrations.

In the past few weeks the German Green Party has sought to exploit the Fukushima disaster for its own political ends, but significantly none of its leaders sought to address the crowds in Berlin. Together with leading members of the SPD and the Left Party, Green Party leaders such as Renate Künast and Jürgen Trittin occupied prominent places behind the main banner of the march to take advantage of a photo opportunity.

Memories are still fresh regarding the role played by the party in the energy question. As federal environment secretary 10 years ago it was Jürgen Trittin who was responsible for concluding a “nuclear consensus” with the main German energy giants. This Green Party policy claimed to prepare for an eventual long-term exodus from nuclear power, but in fact guaranteed a running times of an average 32 years for all existing power plants. This compact with the nuclear energy concerns a decade ago played a crucial role in demobilising militant protests against the transportation and storage of nuclear waste.

As well as maintaining their cosy relations with the nuclear industry during the past 10 years the Greens have sought to develop the closest links to businesses representing alternative forms of energy.

In the event it was left to the head of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) Michael Sommer to deliver the main speech in Berlin in which he stressed the necessity of developing new forms of energy in order to maintain the competitiveness of German industry (Standort Deutschland) against its international rivals.

Traditionally the German trade union federation has refrained from playing any major role in anti-nuclear protests and the environment movement in general. For decades the right-wing mining, chemical and energy union IG BCE has been a cornerstone of the DGB. The fact that Sommer was called upon to speak in Berlin indicates that the organisers of the protest are now seeking to use the services of the German trade union movement to prevent the anti-nuclear movement from assuming a form that could genuinely threaten the interests of German business and the country’s big energy concerns.

Protests against nuclear power and the Libyan war

also took place in Rome on Saturday. A referendum on the building of new nuclear power plants is to be held in Italy on June 12 and 13.



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