

# IG Metall union and German government reaffirm their collaboration

Dietmar Henning  
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Germany's largest union, IG Metall, recently held its 22nd annual congress in Karlsruhe. In the midst of the deepest global economic crisis since the 1930s, the union's executive used the occasion to confirm and celebrate its policy of class collaboration. Federal President Christian Wulff and Chancellor Angela Merkel (both from the Christian Democratic Union—CDU) came to the gathering to pay their respects.

The union leadership's right-wing agenda did not meet any opposition. Some 96.2 percent of delegates voted for the current chair, Berthold Huber, who was re-elected unopposed. The last time IG Metall witnessed such nearly unanimous support for its incumbent chair was in 1965. Deputy chair Detlef Wetzel was also returned to office.

IG Metall [*Industriegewerkschaft Metall*—Industrial Union of Metalworkers] has nearly 2.3 million members. After losing about 400,000 members over the past two decades, the union experienced a slight growth this year of 4,000. IG Metall's total income for 2011 is estimated at around €457 million. The congress was attended by 481 voting delegates, together with some 120 IG Metall officials and nearly 600 international guests.

The main areas of union membership can be found in the metal-working and electrical industries. With 22,000 factories and 3.45 million employees, these are key sectors of the German economy.

Under the leadership of Huber and Wetzel, IG Metall refrained from raising any pay demands in the last round of negotiations. After years of stagnation and job losses, such a policy places the burden of the global economic crisis squarely on the backs of workers.

As Huber put it, for the unions, a crisis “was never the clarion call for success on the pay front.” In other words, when the defence of workers' interests becomes most critical, the IG Metall leader says such a policy is impossible.

Huber was praised for this policy by broad sections of the

ruling class. In March 2010, Chancellor Angela Merkel held a party for Huber's 60th birthday in the chancellery, an honour that is bestowed on only a few, such as the CEO of Deutsche Bank, Josef Ackermann. Huber's birthday bash was also attended by the leading metal and electrical industry employers' representative, Martin Kannegiesser, Siemens CEO Peter Löscher and Volkswagen CEO Martin Winterkorn, with leaders of the works councils of several large corporations, such as Klaus Franz (Opel) and Uwe Hück (Porsche), also taking part in the celebration.

In his recent congress speech, Huber repeatedly stressed that the union was concerned about “the cohesion of society.” The high-level congress visitors show that he and his deputy Wetzel understand this to mean close collaboration with the government.

German president Wulff arrived on the second day of the congress. Three weeks earlier, he had spoken at the congress of the services union ver.di, Germany's second largest union, thanking ver.di in particular and the unions in general for their work in recent years.

Speaking at the IG Metall gathering, the CDU's Wulff now stressed: “I can only imagine our democracy, our society, with free and powerful unions.” It was also thanks to the unions that Germany was in such a good position in the present crisis, he said. “I am thinking about the years of wage restraint, part-time working and the short-time working regulations.”

Wulff said that workplace agreements enabled “structural changes”, pointing to the close cooperation between IG Metall works council leaders and top management. As early as 2004, in the so-called Pforzheimer accord, the union approved deviations from the national collective bargaining agreement in individual companies, which could be worked out by the individual works councils without requiring any reference to economic hardship.

Wulff thanked IG Metall for “standing firm” and assured the delegates that he trusted in the future that IG Metall would

contribute to more progressive “structural transformation”—meaning job losses and plant closures—because the phase-out of the nuclear industry would further accelerate structural changes. “Some industries will become less profitable, some will probably also be eliminated. The IG Metall could play an important role in these changes.”

He specifically thanked the delegates, of whom 88 percent were older than 35, for wanting to turn to the youth. If society forgets young people, this threatens “the cohesion of our society”. It was therefore “extremely important” that IG Metall was committed to younger workers with their own programmes. “I want to stress my thanks for this.”

Wulff was referring here to IG Metall’s campaign calling for apprentices to be offered permanent employment. In reality, this real aim of this campaign is meant to keep youth quiet. Wulff was quite blunt: “In many of our neighbouring European countries the youth are rebelling. Not here. And it should remain so.”

He concluded by saying: “Your efforts as the largest German union are vital for our country”.

Chancellor Merkel had insisted on coming to the congress, “despite her tight schedule”. “Yesterday in Mongolia—today in Karlsruhe”, the IG Metall press office said on Friday.

The chancellor returned Huber’s thanks for extending the invitation and the “fair and honest cooperation during the economic crisis”. She also praised IG Metall for its “moderation in the recent economic crisis.” Germany was the first industrial nation to have reached the same level of production as before the crisis. This has been down to “business, the unions and politicians working together”. Social partnership—the close cooperation of “business, trade unions and politics”—had proved successful in Germany in times of crisis, she claimed.

The chancellor was also thankful for the common position on the question of Europe. IG Metall, along with seven other unions and the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), had paid for an expensive ad campaign calling for the enlargement of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) to bail out the euro. This will ensure that the banks’ profits will again be secured by public funds. Huber has expressed his full support for the EFSF.

Merkel pledged she would continue to work constructively with IG Metall.

Both Wulff and Merkel expressed support for maintaining the retirement age at 67 and against any tax increases for the

wealthy and big business. IG Metall officially calls for the retirement age to be reduced and for higher wages and taxes on the wealthy, but such rhetoric has little or no practical impact on its policies.

In his speech, President Wulff used language that would allow the union to collaborate with the government on raising the retirement age. “It must be weighed carefully, what people can afford in different professions and ages,” he said. The decisive point was that “we make flexible transitions and find workable solutions”.

The IG Metall congress last week once again provided further proof that the union will collaborate with the government to find “practical solutions” in the interest of business.

The alleged opposition inside IG Metall, which the ex-left groups primarily hold up to justify their support for the unions, was completely absent in Karlsruhe. The farther to the right the IG Metall moves, the more it closes ranks.

The only serious disagreement came over deciding the number of members for the well-paid union executive. According to his own figures, Huber (a former Maoist) earns €261,000 per year, plus various Supervisory Board sinecures (at Siemens alone last year, he pocketed €25,300).

Huber and Wetzel wanted a rule change to reduce the Executive Board from seven to five members, after cutting some 200 jobs in the union’s administration last year, saving €20 million annually in salaries. According to Huber, this would make the IG “lean and efficient”.

However, the congress did not agree to cut the size of the executive. The rule change failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority. Clearly, many of the officials attending thought the measure would cut across their own career and pension prospects. Most of the executive board positions are occupied by bureaucrats aged over 60.



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