

Opposition parties, trade unions hold demonstrations in Germany

Our reporters
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Demonstrations involving several thousand people took place last Saturday in 40 German cities. The protests were organized by welfare organizations, trade unions and the three main opposition parties—the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party. Behind the slogan “redistribute fairly,” the organisers called for the introduction of a wealth tax.

The demonstrations were a transparent attempt to begin the campaign for the 2013 parliamentary elections by diverting attention from the responsibility of the very same opposition parties for growing social inequality. One day before the protests, the SPD appointed the right-wing politician and confidante of the German business world Peer Steinbrück as its candidate for chancellor.

The Left Party and the Greens immediately responded by declaring they were prepared to take part in a future coalition government led by Steinbrück.

More than 20 unions and over 300 other organizations called the protests, and the turnout of some 20,000 people nationwide was well below the expectations of the organizers. Those taking part were mainly officials and members of the organizations that organized the demonstrations.

In Berlin, about 3,000 people marched through the city centre from Potsdamer Platz to the Neptune Fountain. The demonstration would have been even smaller were it not for the participation of members and supporters of welfare organisations who marched at the head of the protest. They were followed by bureaucrats from the trade unions and the official opposition parties. Taking up the rear were anarchist organizations

and various pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative (affiliated with the Militant Tendency). The latter played a leading role in preparing the protests.

In Hamburg, one of the main speakers at the final rally was the head of the Greek Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA), Alexis Tsipras. In his speech to the 3,500 demonstrators, Tsipras opposed the cuts imposed on Greece by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but he assured the crowd that his party had no intention of challenging the institutions of the EU. However, even his timid criticism of the austerity program of the EU and IMF was too much for members of the SPD and Greens at the rally. They left the demonstration while Tsipras was speaking.

The main speaker in Frankfurt was Frank Bsirske, the head of the public service union Verdi (United Services Union), who appealed to the SPD, Greens and Left Party to “make the question of redistribution the central question in the federal election campaign.”

Many of the relatively few ordinary workers at the demonstrations were disgusted by the hypocrisy of the union bureaucrats. “It was above all the unions that made possible the redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich,” Thomas from Bochum told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Elke (51), a mother of two, who attended the rally in Bochum, also expressed a lack of confidence in the unions and the established political parties. She said: “There must be a movement independent of any political party, one that comes from the people—a democratically chosen council, supported by experts, to

run the economy and society.”

The chief executive of the German Joint Welfare Association, Ulrich Schneider, declared from the platform: “We stand here and will be on the streets next year to demand answers.”

Elke responded: “Does he mean the election next year? Does he really think that everything will be OK then? The election will not change anything.”

At the demonstration in Frankfurt, Mehmet, an older worker at Deutsche Bahn (German Rail), told the WSWS: “The crisis was caused by the rich and we, the people, have to pick up the tab. In my opinion, capitalism means crisis, war and social injustice. We must fight for a different world and a different system because only the rich are guaranteed a good life under capitalism. The poor are sinking ever deeper into misery.”

When in government from 1998 to 2005, the SPD and the Greens, led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), redistributed more wealth than any other government before or since—from the bottom to the top. They slashed the top tax rate from 53 percent to 42 percent, lowered corporate taxes, and created a huge low-wage sector. At the same time, they implemented the anti-welfare “Agenda 2010” and Hartz 4 legislation.

They continue today to demand social cuts in the interest of the banks, and impose austerity measures at the local and state level where they are in power.

The SPD candidate for chancellor, Peer Steinbrück, stands on the extreme right of the party. As finance minister in a grand coalition led by Christian Democrat Angela Merkel, he was personally responsible for funnelling billions to the banks in 2008—resources that are now being clawed back by means of the debt brake (supported by the SPD and the Greens), in the form of social cuts.

While in power in the Berlin Senate between 2001 and 2011, the Left Party carried out cuts at the expense of the population beyond anything that had been dared by governments headed by the conservative parties.

The trade unions have played the leading role in developing a huge low-wage sector, which, in turn, has undermined the wages and conditions of all other workers. The unions have repeatedly collaborated with the employers in imposing wage cuts.

Given this record, the “redistribute fairly” campaign can be nothing more than a cynical ploy. It was left to the pseudo-left groups to portray the demonstrations as some form of genuine social protest. Their leaflets made no mention of the austerity policies of the SPD and Greens, nor did they deal with the role of the Left Party and the trade unions. Instead, they defended the organizers and promoted the illusion that these organizations could be pushed to the left by applying “pressure from below.”

Socialist Alternative (SAV) did not mention the social cuts introduced by the SPD, Greens and Left Party, or the treacherous role of the trade unions. It praised the protests as the prelude to an “ETUC Day of Action,” i.e., a demonstration of the European trade unions. SAV also appealed to the Left Party to exert more pressure on the SPD and Greens in the campaign for the 2013 elections.



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