

German trade unions march in step with German army

Sven Heymanns and Johannes Stern
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The German Trade Union Federation (DGB) is publicly backing the increasingly aggressive role of the German army (Bundeswehr). This was made clear at a meeting between DGB leader Michael Sommer and the chairmen of the eight unions affiliated to the DGB with the German defence minister, Thomas de Maizière (Christian Democratic Union), in early February.

At a joint press conference, Sommer and de Maizière said that the meeting was only a prelude to a more intensive dialogue between the DGB and the Bundeswehr. Further discussions are planned. Both men also agreed to prepare a joint statement “dealing with the major social issues”, de Maizière declared.

The initiative for the meeting came expressly from the DGB. The last visit by a serving defence minister to the trade union headquarters took place a full 30 years ago.

The meeting made clear the central role played by the unions in every sphere of society to advance the interests of the ruling elite. Not only do they act as co-managers in the companies where they enforce cuts against workers in close cooperation with management in order to maintain the competitiveness of German businesses. They are also increasingly functioning as an extended arm of German foreign and military policy.

It is no coincidence that the DGB seeks to close ranks with the commander of the German military just at the point when German imperialism is undertaking an increasingly aggressive course.

At the beginning of the press conference, Sommer stressed that there were no fundamental differences between the interests of the Bundeswehr and those of the unions. He stated that the “relationship between the armed forces and the trade union movement is not a simple question”, since it was “historically burdened”. Sommer then added: “But this is no longer the case.”

This acknowledgement characterised the “really terrific interview”. They had “much in common” about topics to be discussed between unionists and military officials.

What Sommer describes as “much in common” is in fact the virtual full support on the part of the DGB for the Defence Department and the armed forces.

Sommer made clear that the DGB was prepared to support the growing range of military operations undertaken by the Bundeswehr and its transformation into a global operational army of intervention and occupation. “Once the Bundestag agrees a deployment...we must also do everything we can to properly equip and protect the soldiers,” who, he added, deserved “our respect”.

Already in March 2011, Sommer had given a speech entitled “The unions and their relationship to the armed forces” at the Bundeswehr University in Hamburg, in which he declared that foreign missions conducted by the army have done “much to relieve the relationship between unions and the armed forces”.

In the same speech, Sommer also raised the issue of a “secure supply of raw materials” and gave an insight into the tangible material interests that lie behind the support of the DGB for the Bundeswehr. Just two weeks ago, an article appeared in the *Handelsblatt* newspaper that described how Germany was once again preparing to conduct wars to secure resources for its export industry.

In the meeting last month, Sommer stood next to de Maizière and gave an overview of the other spheres in which the DGB is seeking to strengthen its cooperation with the army. His talks with the Defence Secretary included “structural policies and the tasks of the Bundeswehr”, “human resource development—including the civil sector”, “Germany as

a location for the security industry”, and the “development of the defence industry.”

“Ethical issues” were also discussed, including the use of drones. The minister was very open in this respect, Sommer admitted, and that is why Sommer was not prepared to say much about what had been discussed.

As part of the “location logic”, the DGB defends not only the German armaments industry, but also the government’s drone programme. When the federal government announced plans to reduce the military budget in 2010, the executive of the engineering union IG Metall appealed to the defence ministry not to curb the production of Airbus military transport aircraft, Tornado fighter planes, and the “Talarion” drone project.

IG Metall official Bernhard Stiedl summed up the position of the trade unions: “We are opposed to buying foreign military equipment with public money. We would prefer to keep production in Germany.”

While the unions are trying to cut jobs as quietly as possible, they pose as the defenders and creators of jobs in the defence industry in order to boost German militarism. Their efforts are not confined to the defence industry, but also include the recruitment of youth to the army.

The chairman of the DGB-affiliated union Verdi, Frank Bsirske, said two years ago: “Verdi is committed to continuously and consistently attending to the needs of soldiers and civilian employees of the armed forces.... It is self evident that Verdi also supports recruitment into the armed forces.”

In its alliance with the army, the DGB is undertaking an important ideological function. The foreign missions of the German army are rejected by the vast majority of the population, and there is a profound antipathy to German militarism, which plunged the world into a catastrophe on two occasions in the last century.

Sommer emphasised that an important issue is “the issue of embedding the Bundeswehr in democracy”. What is required is “a socio-political debate in which we are actively involved”. He made clear that the DGB is part of the broader campaign by the defence ministry to boost the image of the armed forces and sway public opinion in favour of a more aggressive militarism.

De Maizière said his meeting with the DGB leadership was part of the “political debate”, which he

would carry out “beyond the armed forces themselves with the scientific community, companies, trade unions, churches, schools and other interested parties”. He was “very pleased to have received the invitation” from the DGB and was also very pleased about the conduct of the talks.

In the cynical manner that typifies the new militarism, he described the joint alliance between the DGB and the army as a “peace movement”. Not only was the union part of such a movement, “the army also sees itself as part of the peace movement,” he announced.

The German army is currently operating worldwide with thousands of soldiers on 13 different battlefields. De Maizière can only make such a preposterous statement because the so-called peace movement has taken the same path as the DGB and become an open supporter of German imperialism.

Workers must understand the significance of the meeting between the German trade unions and de Maizière. The unions and a host of German pseudo-left organisations—such as the Left Party, Marx 21, the SAV or the MLPD—all defend the DGB and in so doing line up with German imperialism.

The alliance between the unions and the Bundeswehr is a warning for the working class. The unions are making it clear that are not only willing to control and police workers in the factories. They are also prepared to support the use of military force to suppress the resistance of the working class.



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