

Germany: Union conference discusses “renewal through strikes”

Markus Salzmann, K. Nesan

16 March 2013

At the beginning of March, the Left Party-related Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS) and the public sector union Verdi organised a conference titled “Renewal through strikes”.

Among the 500 participants in Stuttgart were leading Left Party members, including its leader Bernd Riexinger, union bureaucrats and numerous representatives of pseudo-left groups. These included the state-capitalist Marx 21, allied to the Socialist Workers Party in the UK, and the Socialist Alternative Voran (SAV), allied to the Socialist Party in Britain, which are part of the Left Party and work in the trade unions.

The conference had one main goal: strengthening the trade union apparatus in order to keep under control the growing opposition among workers against the massive attacks on wages, jobs and the welfare state, and to prepare new attacks.

Already at the opening of the conference, the right-wing and anti-working class programme became clear that lay behind the conference slogan “Renewal through strikes”. Uwe Meinhardt, a veteran trade union bureaucrat and the leading representative of the IG Metall union in Stuttgart, made it clear that strikes had to be monopolised by the trade unions. He declared that every independent movement of workers was illegitimate and must be prevented. Whether a strike was “right or wrong” could not be decided by the employees, Meinhardt said.

Meinhardt personifies the type of union bureaucrat gathered at the conference. The conservative *Stuttgarter Zeitung* describes Meinhardt, who sits on the supervisory board of Hewlett-Packard Germany, as “a modern labour leader” and “pragmatic co-manager.”

When co-managers such as Meinhardt speak of strikes, they do not mean undertaking a struggle in the

interests of workers for higher wages and better conditions. They regard the union-led strike as a means of maintaining control over the workers and of imposing the planned cuts in close collaboration with the companies and governments against the workers.

Meinhardt cynically described the labour dispute at AEG in Nuremberg in 2005 as his “biggest strike experience.” At the time, IG Metall shamelessly sold out the strike at the electrical appliance manufacturer; in 2006, hundreds of employees then lost their jobs in a region plagued by unemployment. Shortly before the conference, the dismissal of 1,100 workers at Hewlett-Packard was decided with the agreement of the union.

In various workshops, conference participants shared their thoughts on “strike strategy” and discussed the methods of their union counterparts in the southern European countries. They are preparing for massive class battles in Germany, too. With a general election looming later this year, all the establishment parties are openly discussing a remake of the SPD-Green Party’s Agenda 2010 attacks on welfare and labour rights, as well as a new round of massive social cutbacks.

In a workshop called “Political strikes in a Europe in crisis”, Florian Wild, a staff member of the RLS and member of Verdi and the Left Party, explained the context in which the conference was being held. He pointed to growing protests and strikes by workers since the outbreak of the international financial and economic crisis. Since 2008, there have been 43 general strikes in Europe, 18 of which were in Greece, he said. In the future, due to the pan-European austerity measures, more strikes and protests were likely.

The Left Party and pseudo-left groups are alarmed by this development. The aim of the conference participants was to “learn” the methods through which the unions in southern Europe control the growing

opposition among workers and enforce the cuts dictated by the European Union (EU).

Nuria Montoya, secretary general of the Spanish trade union Comisiones Obreras (CCOO), was invited to the conference as an “expert”. The CCOO was founded in 1976 by the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party (PCE). The CCOO contains numerous leading members of the PCE, and both organisations are playing a key role in enforcing the massive social attacks against Spanish workers.

The CCOO initially supported the social democratic government of Jose Luis Zapatero, in power from 2004 to 2011, in its social attacks. Together with the UGT social democratic trade union confederation, they approved the labour market reforms and easing of employment protection. Earlier this year, the CCOO announced it would continue its “social dialogue” with the Spanish employers’ organisation CEOE. In Stuttgart, Montoya made it clear she was willing to cooperate even more closely with the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy, which is calling for further cuts. Montoya criticised the fact that the government did not want to conduct “any social dialogue”.

To cover over their right-wing politics and enforce the cuts, the CCOO has frequently organised protests and strikes in recent years, including two general strikes in September 2010 and in March 2012. Montoya’s report brought repeated applause.

In reality, the “political strikes” hailed by the Left Party, Marx 21 and SAV are not to enforce the interests of the workers. On the contrary, from the perspective of the ruling class, the mainly one-day general strikes called and controlled by the trade unions are a necessary mechanism to blow off steam and to be able to implement the austerity measures against the resistance of the workers.

There is a fundamental political connection between the strike policy of the trade unions and the social cutbacks. In Spain, unemployment has reached 26 percent in 2013, setting a new record high. More than 60 percent of young people are unemployed. Since the outbreak of the international financial and economic crisis, unemployment has risen from 1.7 million to more than 6 million. In Greece, where most of the general strikes controlled by the unions have taken place in recent years, even more brutal social attacks

have been enforced.

The fact that the Left Party and its pseudo-left allies want to “learn” from the unions in Spain and Greece, and celebrate their strike as “successes”, makes clear what class interests they represent. They do not speak for the working class, but for wealthy layers of the middle class, who are increasingly acting as the open opponents of workers.

While workers in Germany are following with dismay how their colleagues in Greece and Spain are being plunged into the abyss, the German trade unions and their political supporters are preparing to push through the same cuts at home.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact