

Change in leadership of German trade union confederation

Dietmar Henning
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The 20th Congress of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) came to an end in Berlin on Wednesday. The Congress' official motto—"work, solidarity, justice"—has nothing to do with the reality of the policies of the trade unions. The Congress, which was addressed by a number of politicians and state figures, confirmed that the DGB is a key component of bourgeois rule and its apparatus of repression.

The change in leadership of the confederation was a central issue at the Congress. Sixty-two-year-old Michael Sommer, who has served as DGB chair for ten years, made way for Reiner Hoffmann, four years his junior.

Hoffmann comes from the mining, chemical and energy union (IGBCE) and is a member of the Social Democrats (SPD) like Sommer.

Sommer's period in office was characterised by an unprecedented attack on the rights and past gains of the working class. Barely a year after his election as chairman of the DGB, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) announced his Agenda 2010 reforms. They created the conditions for a vast low-wage sector, which today comprises one in three workers in Germany.

Sommer's role was to provide Schröder with freedom of action by suppressing working class resistance to Agenda 2010. When hundreds of thousands demonstrated against the Hartz laws in 2004, the DGB boycotted the demonstrations.

The consequences today are visible not only in widespread conditions of precarious employment and 6 million Hartz IV social welfare claimants, but also in the divergence of incomes. While the chairman of a company listed on the German DAX stock exchange earned 20 times more than the average worker 25 years ago, now he or she makes 200 times as much.

Numerous trade union bureaucrats who sit on boards of management and works councils have profited from the flood of money to management.

DGB membership fell from 7.7 million to 6 million under Sommer, although many members are functionaries or pensioners. In 1990, the year of German reunification, the DGB still had 11 million members.

In his final speech, Sommer portrayed the German government's plan to introduce a minimum wage of €8.50 as a great success. This was an attempt by the union bureaucracy to cover its own tracks. First, it is the policies of the DGB that are to blame for the fact that one in five workers, or 8 million overall, earns less than €8.50 per hour. Second, the government's plan includes a number of exceptions. And third, a wage of €8.50 per hour is hardly sufficient to live on and sets a standard that will drag wage levels down.

Above all, the Congress made clear that following the implementation of a meagre legal minimum wage, the DGB will repudiate any responsibility for the millions of workers in insecure jobs with low earnings. That was what Sommer's successor Hoffmann meant when he announced that the DGB would once again turn to its "core business."

For Hoffmann, "core business" means the interests of a small layer of trade union functionaries who play a central role in the smooth running of production and exploitation of the workers, a role for which they are well paid. The mining and chemical union from which he emerged is notorious for taking class collaboration with the corporations a step further than the large DGB unions IG Metall and Verdi.

In his programmatic address, Hoffmann turned to representatives of government and business who were seated in the front row. He called on them to have a

“debate in society about good work, the value of work, the meaning of work and the quality of products and services.” He demanded that the grand coalition government set forth a programme of research and action “for the work of tomorrow.” He invited companies to “jointly take up the future task of establishing good work.”

Sommer did not limit himself during his time in power to standing by the government in its attacks on workers. He also played an important role in the revival of German militarism.

As he declared in March 2011 in a speech at the German Army University in Hamburg, the Army’s foreign interventions had contributed to a relaxation of the relations between the trade unions and the military. In March 2013, he reached an agreement with then-Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière on closer cooperation between the Army and trade unions. At the time he stated that the German Army was “part of the peace movement.”

In October last year, the DGB organised a workshop on peace and security policies where leading politicians and academics urged support for peacekeeping missions by the German Army and the UN’s “responsibility to protect” doctrine.

Therefore, it was appropriate that German President Joachim Gauck opened the 20th Congress of the DGB. With his speech on the anniversary of German reunification in 2013 and his appearance at the Munich Security Conference this year, Gauck has played a central role in the revival of German militarism.

At the DGB Congress, he praised the trade unions’ “responsible” role in the attacks on workers in Germany and across Europe. “It is certainly not easy to make clear to all members that concessions can be advantageous in the long term for the entire workforce, even for the whole of society,” he said. “But we continue to require this kind of responsibility.”

Then he warned small profession-based unions not to overstretch their sectional interests. “The damaging of our valued German model (must) not come about through the abuse by single professional groups of their key position to impose their own interests against the common interest,” he said.

This was an explicit warning to those organisations not affiliated with the DGB, such as the train drivers’ union (GDL), the pilots’ Cockpit, the air traffic

controllers’ UFO, and the doctors’ Marburg League. According to the coalition agreement, the German government is effectively planning to abolish these unions’ right to strike. Sommer already demanded this in a joint statement with the then-president of the employers’ association, Dieter Hund, in June 2010.

Immediately after his appearance at the DGB Congress, Gauck visited the German-Dutch Corps in Appeldoorn in the Netherlands. The unit, with soldiers from twelve member states, is NATO’s rapid reaction force and is commanded by German and Dutch armies. They seem to be preparing for an intervention in Ukraine or Russia. Gauck attended the “Reliable Sword” military exercise by means of which the Special Forces are preparing for a state of readiness, the German president’s office stated.

Hoffmann personifies the arrogance and unscrupulousness of the DGB. In 1972, he joined the IG chemical, paper and ceramic union. One year previously, 43 years ago, this union organised its last strike. After a business apprenticeship with chemicals firm Hoechst, Hoffmann studied economics with a scholarship from the trade union-aligned Hans-Böckler Foundation.

Between 1983 and 1994 he worked for the Hans-Böckler Foundation in Düsseldorf, after which he took over the role of head of the European Trade Union Institute in Brussels. In May 2003, he was named deputy general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation. Almost five years ago, Hoffmann returned to IGBCE, a merger of the chemical and mining unions, as a regional head.

Hoffmann sits on the board of management of several companies, including Bayer AG. Now as DGB chairman, he boasts that he has direct contact to EU commissioners.

The European expert, Hoffmann hardly uttered a word at the Congress about the catastrophic impact of the social cuts dictated by the EU in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Italy.



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