

Germany: Ver.di union delegates re-elect chairman despite sellouts

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29 September 2015

In future, the Ver.di trade union will collaborate even more closely with the federal government, the state governments and the municipalities in the attacks on public sector employees. This was the message to emerge from the union's congress last week.

Under the slogan "Strength, diversity, future", the more than 1,000 delegates in Leipzig confirmed the previous policy of the union and supported Frank Bsirske by re-electing him as chairman.

The first points were emphasised by Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) and German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) chairman Reiner Hoffmann. In her speech to the congress, Merkel defended the policy of recent years—the cuts policies in Germany and the brutal austerity measures against Greece. She was greeted with polite applause on her arrival, and with "loud applause" when she left, as the record of the meeting noted.

Hoffmann defended the "single union" set-up and "bargaining unity", referring to the contract unity law that is directed against smaller sectional unions outside the DGB and represents a fundamental intervention against the right to strike as a "lesson of the Weimar Republic". Ver.di, which due to the low level of organisation in some areas is also affected by the law, is reportedly preparing a constitutional challenge. Hoffmann was applauded by delegates nevertheless.

The focus of interest, however, was the industrial dispute in education and social services. Usually, the trade unions make sure that their congresses are not held in the midst of labour disputes. At such times they feel forced to feign opposition to the employers—at least in words, due to the mobilisation of the workforce—while behind closed doors, they seek to make a pact with the employers.

Once again, the Ver.di leadership sought to resolve

the dispute before the beginning of the congress. At the end of June, it had recommended acceptance of the arbitration result in the day care strike. The proposal of the arbitrator to increase wages by between zero and 4.5 percent would have meant a reduction in real pay. At five years, the long duration of the new contract would also mean upholding "industrial peace"—i.e., a ban on further strikes for five years. Despite Bsirske's efforts to push through the arbitration proposal using bureaucratic tricks, manoeuvres and threats, nearly 70 percent of Ver.di members involved refused to accept the new contract.

Observers had expected that Bsirske would be weakened by this vote of no confidence. Many even considered his re-election, which had been a forgone conclusion, to be no longer secure. But the congress once again showed that the much-touted "rank-and-file" delegates had nothing to say.

On Monday of last week, Bsirske spoke about the conflict in social and educational services. Ver.di was preparing to continue the strike from mid-October, he claimed, and announced a "massive escalation of the conflict". In fact, the opposite is the case. What was being prepared were so-called flexi-strikes. This means separate regional strike days, which first incur the displeasure of parents because they are unannounced, and, secondly, isolate the strikers in different regions.

Moreover, it is far from certain whether they will take place at all. Bsirske hinted that he was planning a new sell-out. "Everyone" was clear, he said, that the "wage discrimination that had grown over decades could not be eliminated at a stroke". Addressing public sector employers, he appealed: "Without a step, however, which brings improvement for workers, this labour dispute cannot be settled."

This week, Ver.di will again meet with the public

sector employers to seek an end to the dispute.

Bsirske attributed to himself and his union a “positive verdict” in the “core business of contract policy”. He defended the sell-out of the strike at Berlin’s Charité University Hospital as well as of the strike in the Post Office, where workers had resisted being spun off into a low-cost subsidiary.

“Although the spin-off could not be undone, the strike secured the jobs of parcel delivery workers at the Post Office,” Bsirske said to justify the sell-out. As with any compromise, the issue was what prevails: success or failure, he said. “And here clearly, the success of the strikers prevails.” The minutes of the proceedings note at the end of Bsirske’s speech: “Strong, sustained applause.”

Just one day later, Bsirske was re-elected as union chairman with 88.5 percent of the vote. The 63-year-old now heads Ver.di for the fifth time since it was founded in 2001 through the merger of several unions. There was no rival candidate. Although the result is the worst so far for Bsirske considering all the sell-outs for which he is responsible, it strengthens his position.

During the debates it became clear that the delegates present were not keen on picking a fight with the union leadership, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. “Several speakers declared they did not mind the union executive’s consent to the arbitration proposal in the day care conflict at the end of June.”

In his keynote address last Wednesday, Bsirske then dutifully criticised the policies of his invited guests. In addition to the chancellor, Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (Social Democratic Party), responsible for the “contract unity law”, also appeared at the congress. Bsirske criticised the erosion of working and living conditions, the world’s growing social inequality, etc. The delegates celebrated their chairman with standing ovations.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented that Bsirske’s “nuances suggest that he is currently trying to push through some major shifts of emphasis in a union known as chaotic and combative.” Bsirske had avoided the temptation to bring the house down. “On the contrary, the key theme of his speech was a sober and self-critical analysis of necessary changes in his own organisation.”

The major unresolved problem, according to Bsirske, was “that we are losing many young members who

only joined a few years ago.” At 5.6 percent, the proportion of young people among Ver.di members was three percentage points below the average in the DGB. The average age of Ver.di members had increased by more than four years since 2002, and now lies at over 52, Bsirske said.

What haunts Bsirske is the danger that younger layers of workers are turning away from Ver.di and the unions, escaping their control. Bsirske wants to preserve Ver.di so that it can head off any social resistance and subordinate it to the status quo. Its functionaries are handsomely rewarded for their services, and the more than 1,000 delegates—the majority full-time union officials or works council representatives and employees on paid time-off—backed him.



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